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The New Criterion

May 1989

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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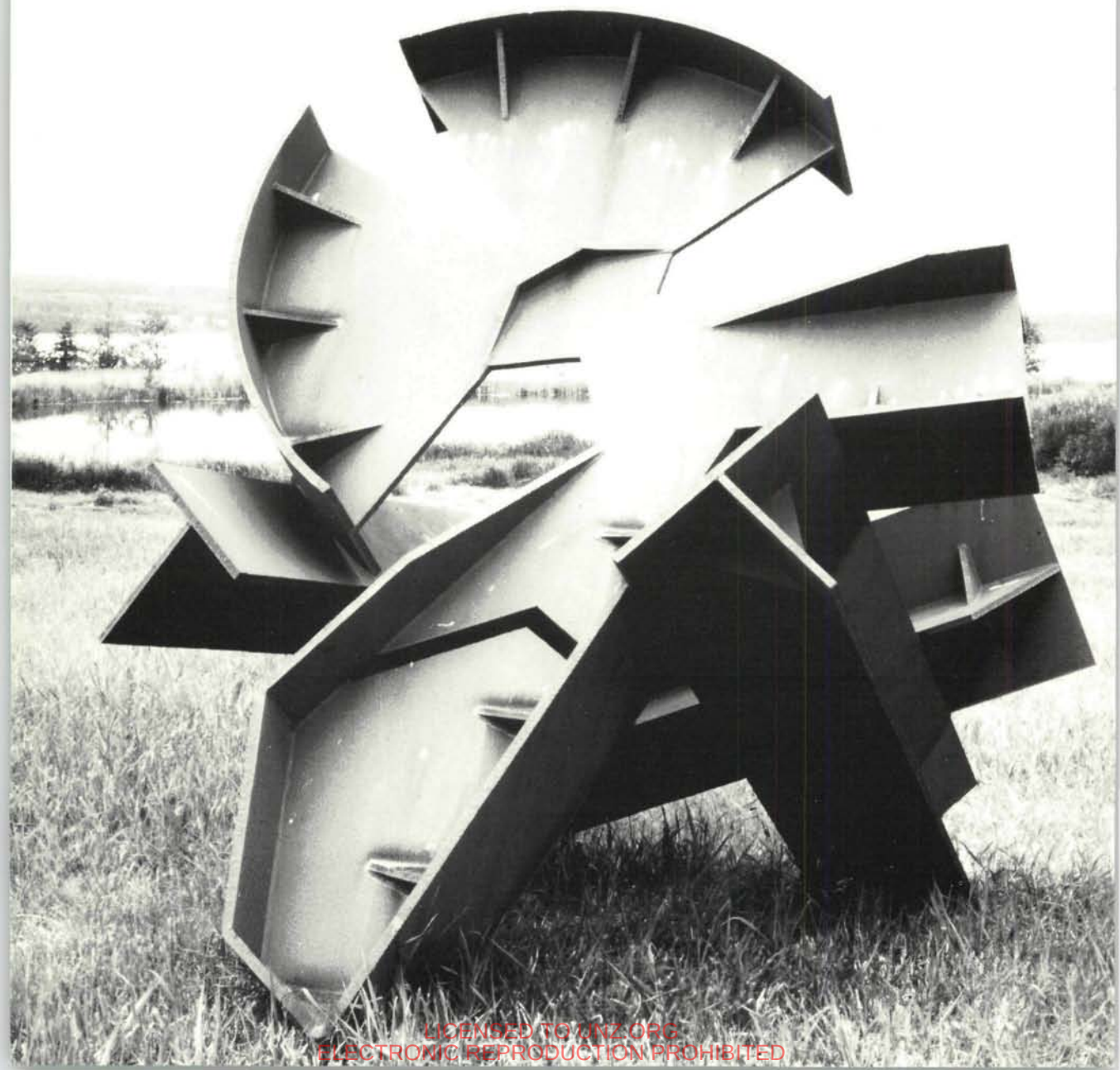

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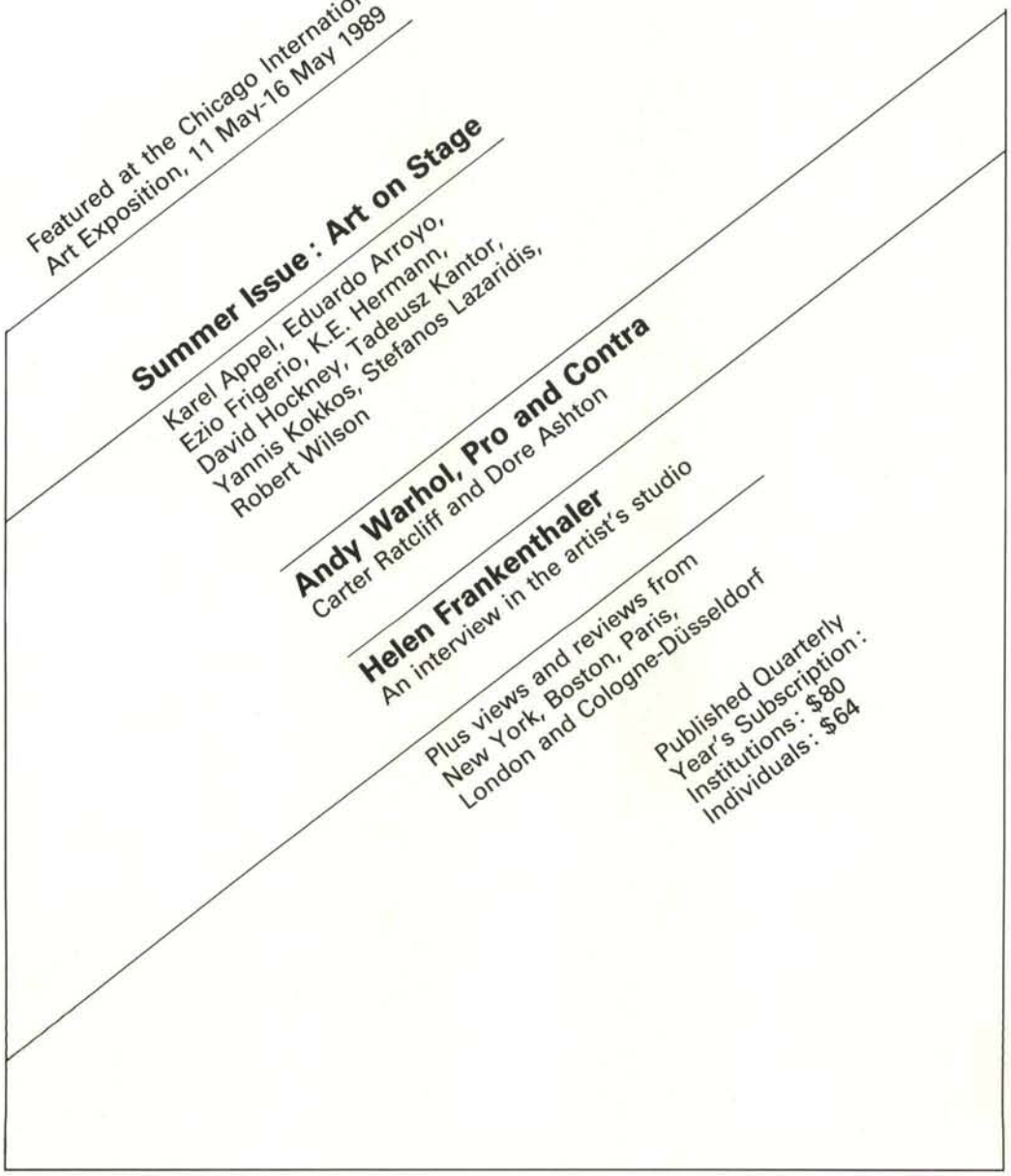
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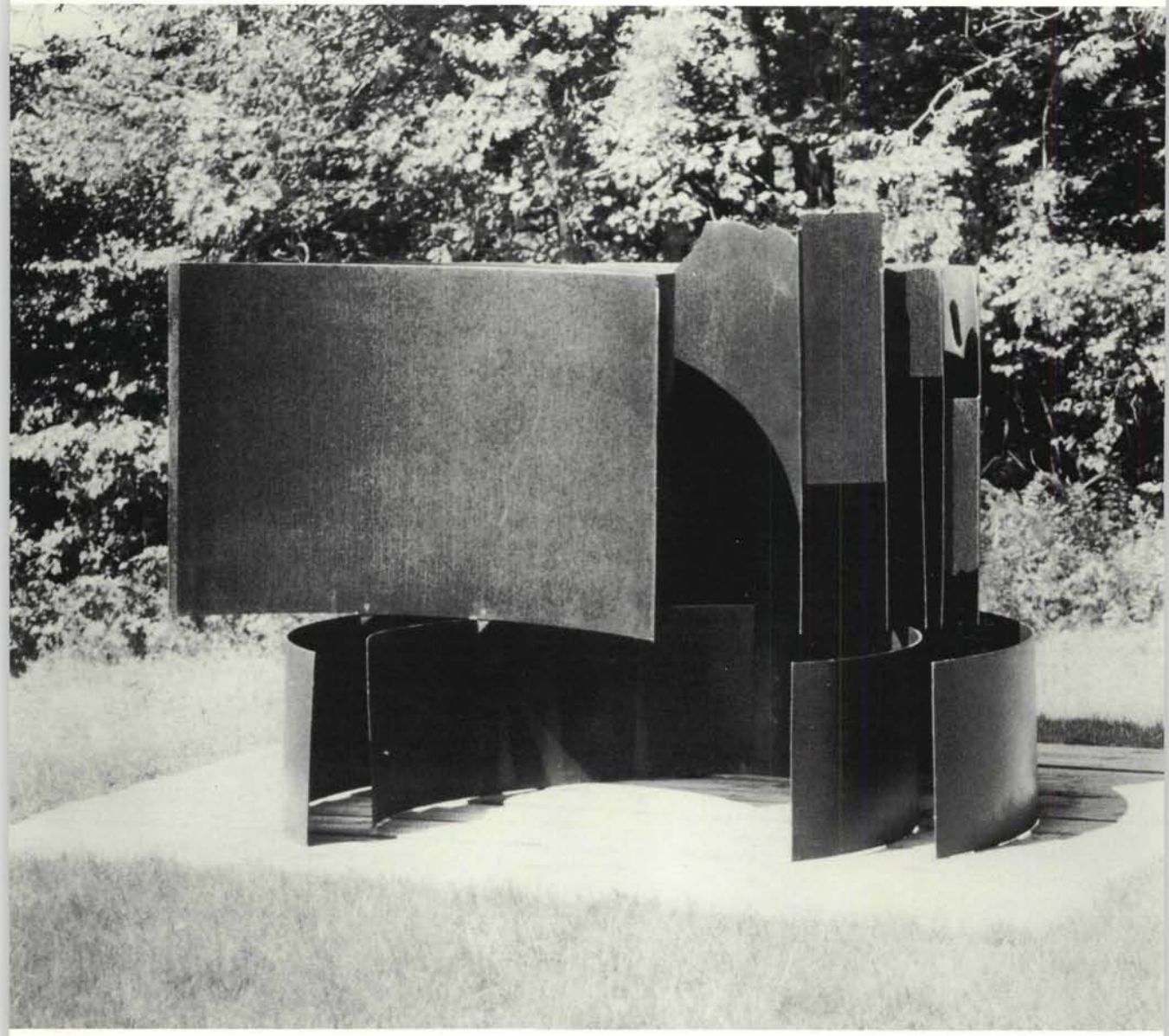

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Bruce Bawer's new book, *Diminishing Fictions,* has been published by Graywolf Press.

Joe Bolton has published poetry in *The Yale Review* and *The Threepenny Review.*

Maria Flook's new collection, *The Improper Persons,* is forthcoming from Wesleyan.

Eric Gibson wrote on Donald Judd for the April issue of *The New Criterion.*

David Gress is Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution. He is co-author of a two-volume *History of West Germany,* to be published by Basil Blackwell in June.

David Gurewich reviewed Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* for our March issue.

Dan Hofstadter contributed "Writing About Degas" to the May 1988 issue of *The New Criterion.*

Donald Justice is the author of *The Sunset Maker* (Atheneum).

Roger Kimball contributes regularly to *Architectural Record.*

Samuel Lipman's essay in this issue is based on a paper delivered in March to an Arturo Toscanini Conference at Wave Hill, in Riverdale, New York.

D. G. Myers is a graduate student in English at Northwestern University.

Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* has been published by North Point Press.

David Pryce-Jones's most recent book is *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs,* just published by Harper & Row.

Peter Sacks's next book, *Promised Lands,* will be published by Viking in 1990.

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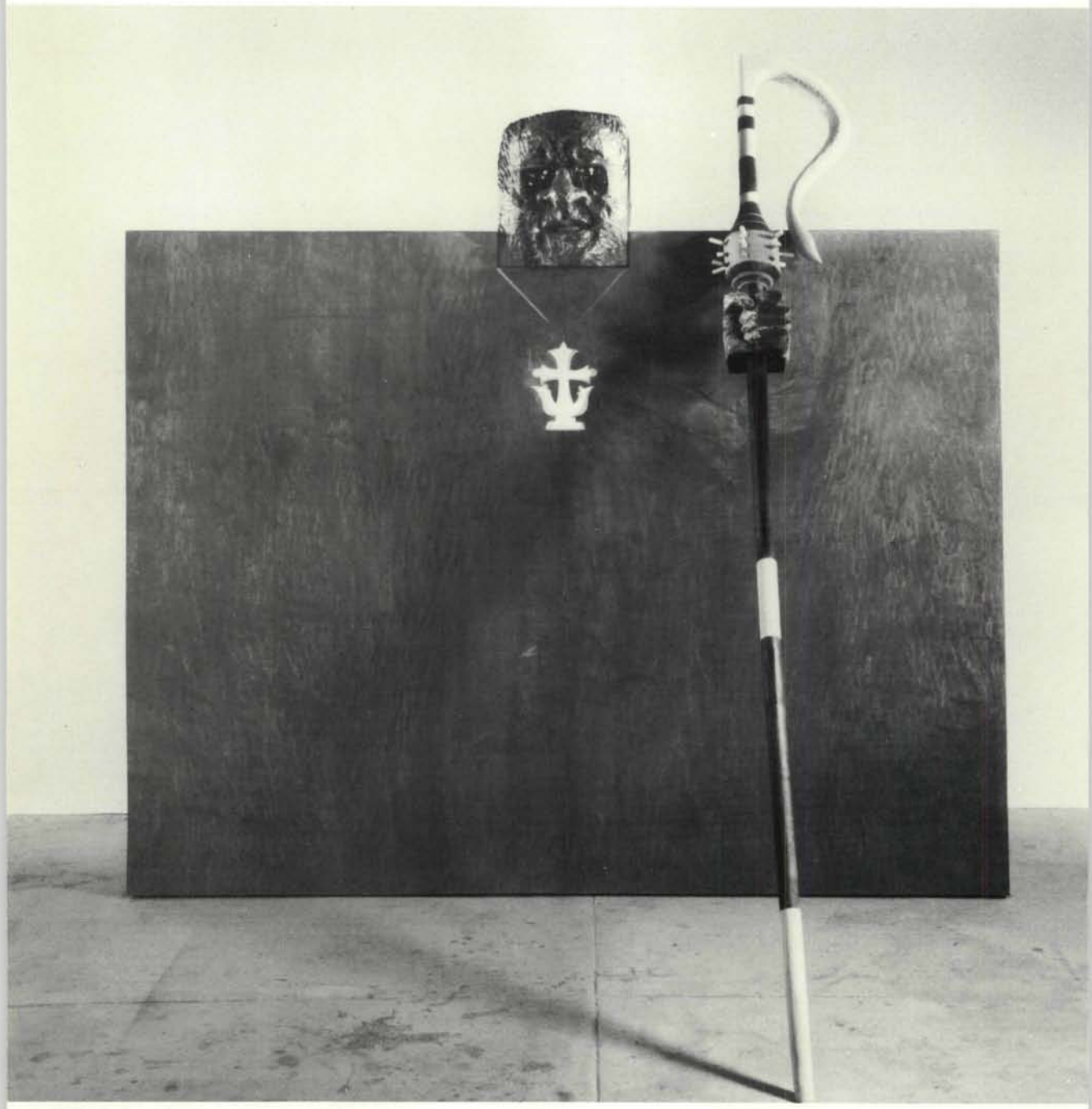

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Art, anarchism, and Félix Fénéon

by Hilton Kramer

In certain modern careers the union of a keen aesthetic intelligence with the imperatives of a radical political commitment would appear to be so complete that there is hardly any way to separate the one from the other even for the purposes of analysis. Yet about such a union of art and politics there is nonetheless something that requires explanation—something that remains, if not exactly an enigma, then at least a paradox, the kind of paradox that illuminates not only the minds of the individuals in question but the larger contradictions that have been endemic to the phenomenon of avant-garde culture in bourgeois societies since the concept of the avant-garde first emerged in nineteenth-century France. It is not always from the most towering figures, moreover, that we can learn the most about what these contradictions have meant in practice. Certain lesser figures—critics, editors, publicists, even dealers—may have much to tell us about the way in which the most exalted artistic ideals can sometimes live on intimate terms with political ideas that, were they ever to be successfully implemented, would be certain to destroy the civilization that made the art possible in the first place.

One of the most interesting of these figures is the French writer Félix Fénéon (1861-1944), who has long been recognized as the most gifted of the critics who devoted themselves to new art in Paris in the last years of the nineteenth century, and who was also known to be closely involved with the most militant elements of the anarchist movement. For many people it will come as a shock to discover that Fénéon lived on until the 1940s; we do not think of him as a contemporary of André Breton and Jean-Paul Sartre. His greatest claim to fame was to have been the critical champion of Georges Seurat, who died in 1891, and it is among the Neo-Impressionist painters and Symbolist writers of the 1890s that we tend in our mind's eye to picture him—an association made enduring by the well-known portraits of Fénéon painted in 1890 by Paul Signac, in 1896 by Félix Vallotton, and in 1901 by Edouard Vuillard, the latter two showing him at his desk in the offices of the *Revue Blanche*, the illustrious journal he served with distinction as editor and writer and governing intelligence. But it turns out that there was a great deal about Fénéon—not only about his longevity but about his political activities, his business affairs, and his private life as well as his work as a writer—that we either never knew or did not pay sufficient attention to. He was a far more accomplished, more complicated, and more mysterious character than most of us had any reason to suspect. We therefore owe much to Joan Ungersma Halperin, who has now given us in *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete & Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* an excellent biography of this strange figure.[1] Though by no means beyond criticism in every respect, Professor Halperin's

1 *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete & Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, by Joan Ungersma Halperin; Yale University Press, 425 pages, $35.

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biography brings to light a good deal about Fénéon's life and work that until now has remained obscure—obscure, it should be noted, largely because it suited Fénéon for much of the truth about his life and work to remain concealed.

The writing of Fénéon's life has been a long endeavor for Professor Halperin, and she has been nothing if not diligent in her preparations for the task. In 1970 she edited the most complete collection of his writings that we now have,[2] and ten years later she published a useful guide to the art criticism.[3] For her new book she has considerably enlarged the scope of her researches. The art of Seurat and the Neo-Impressionist circle is inevitably a principal focus. The prior generation of Impressionist painters, about whose work Fénéon often displayed a certain ambivalence, comes in for a good deal of attention, too. So does his work as a champion of the Symbolist poets—Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Laforgue, et al. There is much here about his relations with Mallarmé and Pissarro, both of whom he adored; some interesting details about his attitude toward Gauguin, whom for the most part he did not think well of; about Matisse, whom he admired and served as a dealer; and even about Picasso, whose art he didn't much care for. (He disliked *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, for example.)

Professor Halperin also gives us an absorbing account of the trial—the so-called Trial of the Thirty—in which Fénéon was accused (and ultimately acquitted) of participating in a conspiracy to commit acts of anarchist terrorism. It is Professor Halperin's belief that Fénéon was guilty of at least one such terrorist act himself, the bombing of the fashionable Foyot restaurant in 1894. There is no question but that he thoroughly approved and sometimes abetted the practice of "propaganda by deed," as terrorist acts were called in anarchist circles. On the whole, I am inclined to be persuaded by Professor Halperin in this matter, but it must be said that she offers no certain proof of Fénéon's guilt in the Foyot bombing. (I take her dramatic vignette of Fénéon's execution of this deed to be an imaginative reconstruction—which is to say, pure fiction.) And to believe him guilty of this crime, one must also believe that Fénéon was willing to deceive Mallarmé, the poet he venerated more than any other, whom he allowed to testify on his behalf—and very eloquently, too—at the Trial of the Thirty.

Given Fénéon's almost superhuman powers of detachment from what conventional opinion looked upon as moral scruple, I frankly doubt if this deception—if that is what it was—of a writer he regarded as a friend and indeed, as Professor Halperin says, one of his "gods," would have given him much cause for hesitation. It was in Fénéon's nature to live on easy terms with situations that many lesser mortals would have found to be oppressively burdened with excruciating moral contradictions. In his politics, anyway, Fénéon was the complete ideologue, and in other matters, too, he was remarkably adept at giving his own convictions and pleasures an unquestioned priority over every other consideration.

We are offered plentiful evidence of this tendency in Professor Halperin's detailed chronicle of Fénéon's relations with women—a subject worthy of a small volume in itself. It was said when he was doing his military service as a young man that "the lubricity of Fénéon [was] legendary in the annals of the *voluntariat*," and his disposition in this respect seems not to have suffered any notable diminution with the passage of time. Professor Halperin quotes some examples of the pornographic wit and cheerfully salacious inventions that characterized his correspondence with certain women Fénéon was involved with, and he apparently never lost the habit of speaking about personal sexual matters in terms that were astonishingly graphic and obscene even by the emancipated standards of the bohemian milieus in which he moved. At the same time,

2 *Oeuvres plus que complétes*, by Félix Fénéon (two volumes); Geneva, 1970.

3 *Félix Fénéon and the Language of Art Criticism*; Ann Arbor, 1980.

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he remained devoted, after a fashion, to the only woman he actually married. "His marriage at age thirty-six was in a sense conventional," Professor Halperin writes, "since his mother picked the bride, Fanny Goubaux, a divorced woman, the daughter of a friend." But this long-lived marriage was only a small part of the story of Fénéon's relations with women. "Throughout his marriage," Professor Halperin writes, "with his wife's knowledge [though not exactly with her consent], he maintained a relationship with a Belgian woman he had met several years before, Camile Platteel, with whom he also shared his intellectual and artistic interests; an unusual ménage à trois, which lasted forty-six years, until Platteel's death at age eighty-six." Then too, as Professor Halperin tells us, "Fénéon was an ardent lover of common working women as well as women privileged with more education and status." This was the side of his life that Fénéon preferred to keep secret. As Professor Halperin writes: "when my research turned up evidence of Fénéon's lusty, long-lived love affairs, most of his male friends were shocked and disbelieving." With at least two of the "common working women" he was involved with, Fénéon fathered illegitimate sons in whom he took no special interest. (That, too, I suppose, could be called the "conventional" side of his life.) From Professor Halperin's account, it would appear that most of these women adored Fénéon. But even for Professor Halperin, who, if not exactly adoring, tends nonetheless to be forgiving in most matters, Fénéon's behavior is disturbing and not always (shall we say?) in perfect alignment with his professed political sentiments. Yet the closest she can bring herself to a note of censure is to take refuge in some observations about "the complexity of Fénéon's attitude towards women—a mélange of daring, repression, rage, and insight," etc. It is often the case that biographers who have immersed themselves for a considerable length of time in their subjects tend to absorb something of their moral outlook, and Professor Halperin cannot be said to have entirely escaped this professional deformation. But as she also writes at times from a distinctly but highly selective feminist outlook, there are parts of this book that are hopelessly conflicted, and these have mainly to do with Fénéon's relations with women. A good deal of the time one has the impression that Professor Halperin is rather proud, even boastful, of her subject's sexual prowess. Then she remembers to remember how it all looks from the woman's angle, and we are back in the realm of Fénéon's "complexity."

From the perspective of cultural history, many of the most illuminating pages of this book are devoted to Fénéon's contributions, as writer and editor, to the numerous, short-lived "little" magazines that were so essential to the late nineteenth-century Paris avant-garde. For these journals he wrote about new developments in art and literature, and he secured important manuscripts—for *La Vogue*, for example, he edited the first publication of Rimbaud's *Les Illuminations* in 1886, and published translations of Dostoevsky, Keats, and Walt Whitman—and he made many contributions to anarchist papers as well. Between 1883 and 1895, writes Professor Halperin, "Fénéon published in more than twenty-one different reviews," most of them Symbolist or anarchist in outlook. (Generally his art criticism was signed and the literary and anarchist writings were not.) Most of this work, which entailed long hours with difficult subjects, was done at night or at other free moments, while Fénéon earned a modest living as a civil servant (as, indeed, a "model employee," it was said) in, of all places, the War Department, where he served in the recruiting division. When he lost that position because of the Trial of the Thirty, he went to the *Revue Blanche*, where his wealthy bourgeois employers were able to pay him a decent salary. (Among Fénéon's many other contributions to the magazine was his own translation of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.) Later he became a newspaper journalist—it was typical of

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Fénéon that he gave money to the newly founded radical paper *L'Humanité,* while drawing a salary from the conservative *Figaro*—and still later he became a successful art dealer at Bernheim Jeune, representing (among others) Signac, Matisse, and Bonnard.

Fénéon also managed over the years to acquire a sizable art collection, which in later years, when his political commitment had decisively shifted from anarchism to Communism, he hoped to bequeath to the Soviet Union—a plan that was foiled by the outbreak of the Second World War. Did Fénéon know what had happened to the life of art in the Stalinist terror? Was he aware that Stalin had been responsible for the murder of a great many more anarchists than the despised French bourgeois governments had ever dreamed of executing? Professor Halperin does not say. Her interest tends to flag when it comes to the last two decades of Fénéon's life. By the 1920s, he had become an historical figure himself, and many people began turning to him for first-hand information about the now celebrated artists and writers whose accomplishments he had been one of the first to recognize. We are given occasional glimpses into Fénéon's correspondence in the later years and a few fugitive details about his political commitments, but by and large Professor Halperin fails to give us an adequate account of Fénéon in his old age.

As a young man he was, in the figure he presented to the world, a rebel-dandy straight out of the pages of Baudelaire. On very little money he lavished immense care on his appearance. "Personal grooming became a fetish," writes Professor Halperin. After his military service, she reports,

> He kept his military haircut, a close-cropped brush—it was the most elegant, recent style. But he shaved his cheeks and upper lip clean of the traditional beard and mustache; his facial hair was light-colored and made a poor showing, he thought. He left only the blond tuft that seemed to flourish naturally under his chin. He used pumice stone on his elbows and knees and manicured the nails of his long fingers . . . . His skin was fresh and smelled faintly of cuir de Russie, his favored perfume. And he dressed soberly, as elegantly as he could, with never a discordant note . . . . He had just turned twenty, but had left callow youth behind.

And again:

> Fénéon was always impeccably attired. In 1886, he regularly appeared in silk top hat, puce-colored suit, dark red gloves and patent leather shoes. He carried a cane—and a debt of some forty francs to various shoemakers.

"There seems to be a contradiction," Professor Halperin observes, "between the dandy's cult of the self and Fénéon's anarchist commitment to improve the lot of the ignorant, the poor, and the oppressed, even at the risk of losing his own freedom." Yet she makes short work of this "contradiction." If Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life* provided the model for the dandy, Professor Halperin is eager to align that model with Fénéon's anarchist ideals. "Dandyism," she writes, ". . . can be seen as a leveler of old class distinctions, since it is up to the individual to create his or her own 'class' . . . . For Fénéon, the perfecting of his own person was contingent upon the anarchist ideal that all people should have the means to enjoy maximum moral and material development." Where this leaves the forty-franc debt to various shoemakers, who were scarcely aided in *their* attempts at moral and material development by patrons with such an outlook, Professor Halperin does not say. Fénéon, we are assured, "put himself increasingly at the service of others," and we have no reason to doubt that he did. But there nonetheless remains something psychologically naïve in this account of Fénéon's dandyism. There certainly *was* an element of anti-bourgeois rebellion in that dandyism, but there was also a very large element of the same kind of detached and ironic self-aggrandizement that governed Fénéon's relations with women, with his

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employers, and indeed with all of society. Social justice may have been his ideal, but that ideal was rarely, if ever, allowed to impose itself as an impediment to the realization of his own fondest pleasures. When it came to arranging matters to his own satisfaction, Fénéon had little or nothing to learn from the selective morality and indifferent conscience he so bitterly abominated in the bourgeoisie. In his own life this dandy-anarchist-aesthete was in many respects a kind of caricature of the archetypal bourgeois hypocrite. When he had made enough money in the art business, he retired, informing the Bernheims in 1924 that "I am ripe for the idle life," and an idle radical he more or less remained for the next twenty years. Nor did his political radicalism ever impair his work as a businessman. At Bernheim Jeune, Professor Halperin writes, "the anarchist, who now declared himself a Communist, sold fortunes worth of paintings . . . . He was a superlative agent, looking out for the interests both of the artists and the gallery." And Professor Halperin adds that he "looked after the details of his own contract [with Bernheim Jeune] as conscientiously as he did the contracts of artists whose work he sold." Professor Halperin also suggests that Fénéon "misled his wife as to his earnings" in order to share his money with those in need. No doubt. But his own needs and expenses were not always those that could be reported to a faithful wife.

I trust it will be evident from even this incomplete account of Professor Halperin's biography that Fénéon was indeed a very remarkable figure. Yet as extraordinary as he was in so many ways—in so many ways, it should be noted, that for better or for worse prefigure the cultural ethos of our time—it is finally on the basis of his art criticism that Fénéon makes his primary claim on the attention of posterity. There isn't very much of that criticism—in the attractive little paperback volume that Françoise Cachin edited in 1966, it amounts to little more than thirty thousand words—and the most important parts of even this small oeuvre were written between 1883 and 1892 and amount to a lot less than that.[4] In this criticism, moreover, Fénéon will often be found to change his mind—it seems to be a habit of the best critics to do so—and he never writes about anything at length or, for that matter, in depth. He brought to the writing of criticism a light touch—Mme. Cachin even speaks of "a certain frivolity"—and he was temperamentally disinclined to labor his points. Yet about the really important aspects of the new art he encountered in the decade or so in which much of this criticism was written, he identified the essential issues—the essential *aesthetic* issues. As Professor Halperin correctly observes, "his chief interest in the pictures is aesthetic," although, as she also points out, he was acutely aware of the importance of the subject matter, a radically new subject matter in many cases, which made those same pictures so difficult for the public to deal with. Indeed, so far was Fénéon from being indifferent to the subjects that artists made use of that he actually rejected some of the last paintings of Seurat—the painter he esteemed more than any other—because they dwelt so centrally on the figure. He seems to have especially disliked the *Young Woman Powdering Herself*. But he nonetheless recognized at once what was important in Seurat:

> Here in truth fancy brushwork is futile, tricks of the trade impossible; there is no room for bravura—let the hand be numb, but the eye quick, shrewd, and knowing. Whether the subject is an ostrich plume, a bundle of straw, a wave, or a rock, the handling of the brush remains the same.

And in his response to the *Grand Jatte* when it was first exhibited, he described it in a way that needs little amendment a century later:

> The subject: beneath a sultry sky, at four o'clock, the island, boats slipping past its flank,

4 *Au-delà de l'impressionisme*, by Félix Fénéon, edited by Françoise Cachin; Paris, 1966.

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> stirring with a casual Sunday crowd enjoying the fresh air among trees; and these forty or so figures are endowed with a succinct, hieratic line, rigorously drawn in full-face or in profile or from the back, some seated at right angles, others stretched out horizontally, others standing rigidly; as though by a modernizing Puvis.
>
> The atmosphere is transparent and uncommonly vibrant; the surface seems to flicker or glimmer. Perhaps this sensation, which is experienced in front of certain other paintings in the same room, can be explained by the theory of Dove [the German physicist who wrote on optics]; the retina, expecting distinct rays of light to act on it, perceives in very rapid alternation both the dissociated colored elements and their resultant.

Professor Halperin lists the various terms Fénéon employed in explaining the Neo-Impressionist method. He never spoke of *pointillisme*, which the artists never accepted, but wrote instead of "a seeding of tiny coloring strokes . . . a whirling host of minute spots . . . a swarming of prismatic spangles in vital competition for a harmony of the whole." And of this method he wrote:

> This seeding of coloring spots is extremely sensitive because its constituent elements can be continuously varied . . . . So the painters chose this uniform stroke, but the spot itself had no more reality than the stitch in tapestry; it was like substituting a neutral typography—to the benefit of the text—for an affected and immoderate handwriting.

It was, Fénéon insisted, a sort of "abstract execution," by which, as Professor Halperin points out, "he naturally did not mean nonrepresentational art but rather that distillation or synthesis of form and color that he prized" in the painting. But as she also observes, the "abstract execution" that Fénéon discerned in this art was indeed to lead the way toward abstraction.

What Fénéon saw in Seurat, in other words, was the advent of the kind of "pure" painting, one might even say formalist painting, that would soon become a central aesthetic issue in the modernist art of the twentieth century. But in what relation did this genuine and profound aesthetic response to Seurat stand to the political commitment—the commitment to anarchism—that was also so important to Fénéon? It doesn't answer this question to say that some of Fénéon's best friends among the artists—Pissarro, for example, and Signac, who followed Fénéon's example in subsequently shifting from anarchism to Marxism to the Communist Party—were also of the anarchist persuasion.[5] Seurat certainly wasn't, and Fénéon acknowledged him as the *chef d'école*. There is a distinct irony, moreover, in the spectacle of this anarchist/libertarian critic embracing the most disciplined, the most formal, and—to use his own term—hieratic style of his time as the very model of artistic achievement. Perhaps it can only be explained by some law of compensation: what Fénéon most despised in society and in life itself—rules, hierarchies, restraints, prohibitions, and indeed limits of any kind on his freedom—he was perfectly willing and indeed eager to uphold in the realm of art.

However we wish to explain this paradox, it remains the paradox that defined him as an historical figure. The great difference that separates his day from ours is not to be found in Fénéon's political radicalism, for that has now become an institutionalized component of our social and cultural life. The difference lies in the official attitude toward art, which now favors precisely the kind of libertarian aesthetic—sometimes known as postmodernism—that stands at the greatest possible distance from Seurat and his "hieratic line." It is odd to think that, a century later, it isn't so much Fénéon's aestheticism that we've inherited as an artistically deformed version of the anarchism that was its opposite.

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5 The definitive study of the relation of art to political radicalism in this period remains Eugenia W. Herbert's *The Artist and Social Reform, France and Belgium, 1885-1898*; New Haven, 1961.

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The year that changed everything: 1968

by David Gress

Nineteen-sixty eight was the pivotal year of the postwar era. Before 1968, American power in the world was confidently deployed and greatly respected, if not admired. After 1968, America started down the long slope of self-inflicted decadence which even Ronald Reagan's rhetoric was unable to reverse. Before 1968, Americans, with few exceptions, saw their country moving forward on a broad avenue of social and economic progress toward general affluence and equal opportunity. After 1968, Americans of the political elite began believing in group rights and equality of result. More important, before 1968 Americans believed in containing the Soviet Union and its allies—the forces known by the now-quaint term "world Communism." So seriously did they take this struggle that, for example, they built fallout shelters and maintained a system of air defense of the continental United States. After 1968, Americans in significant numbers came to distrust their own polity and culture to such a degree that they could no longer conceive of any external enemy as dangerous or evil as the enemy within. As a consequence, they abandoned the struggle with "world Communism," which had come to be seen as merely an illusion fostered by the very same domestic enemy. Americans, always uneasy with the vast power their country possessed, began establishing barrier after barrier to the exercise of that power, as though it were the greatest source of evil in the world.

The effects of 1968 do not stop there, however. They extend to the intellectual and academic agenda, which was reforged in the 1960s to create the culture of leftist orthodoxy which today, at the end of the 1980s, pervades the American artistic, intellectual, academic, and journalistic scene.

The agents of this reforging have labeled themselves and their ideology as liberal rather than leftist. As a result, both Americans and foreign observers of American political culture labor under the peculiar illusion that there is no left wing to speak of in this country. So, for example, in a recent talk at Stanford University, Alexander Cockburn, the British-born radical writer and journalist, denounced the American media as incorrigibly reactionary accomplices in American imperialism and worldwide oppression. As it happens, serious studies have been done on the political opinions of American journalists, which show, for instance, that they vote overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates, that over half of them admire Fidel Castro and Daniel Ortega, that they believe that black poverty is due to white oppression, and that they regard the United States and the Soviet Union as morally equivalent. Cockburn's assertions, in fact, might well be regarded as libelous by Tom Brokaw and Dan Rather—two figures he singled out for excoriation as lackeys of American power.

Nevertheless, when the Cockburns of this world go on to point out that there is no vital

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socialist party in the United States, they are right. What we have instead is an amalgam of neo-Marxist and New Leftist ideas about America and the world. These ideas, although long discarded by serious socialists in Europe, are given new currency by the addition of feminism, environmentalism, and the embarrassing Russophilia of the Gorbachev era. The true measure of the victory of 1968 is that, twenty years later, the victors have succeeded in "Americanizing" a vulgar leftism. Thus, for example, discriminatory "affirmative action" is now regarded by business and government as being in the best tradition of American constitutional democracy.

In short, a shift has taken place in the power to confer meaning, and the corollary power to define agendas and control argument. I am thinking specifically of the radical change in the meaning of important terms like "education," "justice," and "freedom." Above all, I am thinking of the radical change in the meaning of modernity itself, of what it means to be modern. Before 1968 to be modern was to be for tolerance, freedom of thought and speech, the color-blind extension of civil rights, and individual autonomy. For the victors of 1968, however, to be modern was to oppose constitutional democracy, the institutions of rational authority, and the social system of advanced capitalism on the grounds that they were antagonistic to the struggle for freedom, pleasure, social justice, and transcendence. Before 1968, supporters of Western modernity understood that the struggle for autonomy exists in a necessary tension with the institutions of society. After 1968, they repudiated these institutions or set out to destroy them from within.

Nowhere has the transformation of cultural attitudes been more vivid than in the academy, where a virtual civil war has broken out between the old-fashioned modernists and their radical enemies. This civil war broke out as the radicals of 1968 began what their more honest German contemporaries called "the long march through the institutions." It was their good fortune that they managed to start that march into academic and cultural employment during the final years of the great expansion of higher education. No sooner were they inside than the economic crises of the 1970s, and critical demographic shifts in the society as a whole, put an end to that expansion. But by that time the generation of 1968, now itself middle-aged, had won the main battle of the academic agenda, and it faced few young rivals, since most of the jobs were already taken. What is more, those few younger scholars who did manage to find employment were often themselves socialized to accept the agenda of 1968, the agenda under which education, justice, and modernity had come to mean the opposite of what they had meant for four centuries of Western history.

Precisely how this new intellectual and academic agenda evolved into its present form, and the role played by the radical victories of 1968 in shaping it, is a subject about which the recent crop of books on the events of 1968 have a good deal to tell us. I want to begin by briefly discussing three of these books—*The Year of the Barricades: A Journey through 1968* by David Caute, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* by Charles Kaiser, and *Turning Point: 1968* by Irwin and Debi Unger. And I shall also be taking a look at some recent European writings on this subject, particularly *La pensée 68; Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, and *Die Tränen der Revolution: Die 68er zwanzig Jahre danach* by Rainer Bieling.[1]

1 *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey through 1968*, by David Caute; Harper & Row, 514 pages, $24.95; *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation*, by Charles Kaiser; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 308 pages, $19.95; *Turning Point: 1968* by Irwin and Debi Unger; Scribner's, 568 pages, $24.95; *La pensée 68: Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain*, by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut; Gallimard (Paris); *Die Tränen der Revolution: Die 68er zwanzig Jahre danach*, by Rainer Bieling; Siedler (Berlin).

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Finally, I will take up the debate as it appeared in a recent symposium published in the quarterly *Salmagundi*.

The common weakness of all three English-language accounts of 1968 is that their authors are tendentiously on the side of the "movement" in all its guises: against Vietnam, against university authority, against the bourgeois order. The conservative enemy is either invisible, anonymous, or, when quoted, faintly ridiculous. None of the three books conveys any sense that there might be serious arguments on the other side.

That being said, all do offer passages of occasionally compelling journalism. Charles Kaiser, for example, is clearly enamored of the rock music of the 1960s and its associated culture. One does not have to share that enthusiasm to enjoy his exegesis of Bob Dylan's long rivalry with the Beatles. David Caute, a veteran of the British Old Left, celebrates the barricades, but at least permits the other side to speak now and then, as in his account of the occupation of the London School of Economics in late 1968. Moreover, Caute's chronicle is made more informative by being global; it includes Paris, Berlin, Prague, and even Mexico City.

Irwin and Debi Unger are the best historians. Their liberal (not leftist) sympathies are evident but do not detract notably from a clear and coherent narrative. Like Caute and Kaiser, however, they argue that 1968 was the year when "traditional America began the long reconquest that culminated in the election of Ronald Reagan." Well, not exactly. What came back in 1980 was a rhetoric of conservatism that concealed a modified version of old-fashioned, Cold War liberalism. None of the important principles that gained ground in 1968 were seriously threatened, whether one looks at the dogma of equality of result, at the power of the media or congress, or at the New Left's hegemony in cultural and intellectual life. In a way, the authors acknowledge this obvious fact. For all of them, 1968 irrevocably transformed the student generation and, by extension, America. None of them doubts that that transformation was good and valuable, and that we are all better for it.

Are we? Kaiser concludes his story by asking: "What did we accomplish? There have been no more Vietnams since 1968. That is our generation's finest achievement. The 58,021 Americans who perished in Southeast Asia did not die in vain: their sacrifice saved the lives of hundreds of thousands who came after them, who thus far have been spared the folly of similar adventures."

The sheer fatuous complacency of these lines would be hard to rival—and by fatuous I am not referring to the fact that Kaiser was all of eighteen years old in 1968, so that the word "we" is surely to be taken in a fairly loose sense. Rather it is as though, for Kaiser, the rest of the world does not exist; the single standard of value and accomplishment is the short-term material safety of young upper-middle-class Americans like himself. The millions murdered by the Communist victors in Indochina do not enter into his world view. This is curious since, earlier in his book, he had the honesty to say that the Viet Cong committed atrocities far worse than any attributed to Americans. Even so, he does not make the connection that the American defeat meant that all of Indochina had to undergo such atrocities for years on end. On the contrary, he celebrates that defeat, and his own minor part in bringing it about.

The European response to the post-Vietnam world has been very different from this. Kaiser's self-satisfied parochialism stands in stark contrast, for example, to the humility of Jean Lacouture, the French historian and journalist who, in the 1960s, used all of his considerable influence to attack the United States involvement in Vietnam. No sooner was it clear, by the mid-1970s, that Communist rule in Vietnam and Cambodia was so much worse than the war had been as to make any comparison obscene than he issued a public statement of contrition for his part in the American defeat. Lacouture believed that he bore a

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share of responsibility for the Cambodian and Vietnamese holocausts in the exact sense that the appeasers of the 1930s bore a share of responsibility for World War II and the murder of the European Jews.

Thus, although Vietnam was behind much of the uproar in Europe—the barricades of May in Paris, the terrorism of "Red Rudi" Dutschke and Andreas Baader—the residue of the Sixties is not the same there as it has been here. Few, if any, Americans on the winning side of 1968 doubt the worth or the justice of their cause; few European intellectuals today do not doubt it, at least to some degree, nor has their victory been as unambiguous or as broad. The American books on 1968, presented as works of historical journalism, are extended glorifications of the radical movements of that year, whereas the European texts express skepticism. Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, in their *La Pensée 68*, even define the basic ideology of 1968 as "anti-humanism." Are they right? To ask that question is to ask what 1968 meant, in Europe as well as America, and how that meaning is reflected, or distorted, in the current crop of commemorative analyses.

The German spectacle of 1968 was both more traditional and more radical than that of either America or France. More traditional because, according to Rainer Bieling in *Die Tränen der Revolution* ("The Tears of Revolution"), the German student leaders saw themselves as fulfilling a very traditional promise, namely the promise of the Enlightenment to free man (in Kant's view) from his self-inflicted immaturity. The student leaders wanted to take the next logical step: to liberate citizens who were supposedly subjugated by powerful interests. But the German protest was more radical, too, because its leaders adopted revolutionary Marxism as their guiding doctrine. If most American radicals soon saw the folly of developing an indigenous Marxism, their counterparts in Germany chose the opposite path: they rejected both liberalism (in the original sense of the word) and the frenetic, dressed-up Marxism of Paris in favor of a dogmatic orthodoxy that, as the months and years passed, became indistinguishable from that enforced by bayonets and prison camps in East Germany and the Soviet Union. A significant fraction of them turned to terrorism when the majority of German citizens refused to endorse their program of liberation. Nothing remotely comparable to West German terrorism appeared on the French or American scene. The only parallel was Italy, where similarly small groups of radical students made the apparent discovery that they were uniquely called upon to enforce the project of liberation by murdering representatives of the forces of evil.

German terrorism can be explained in part by the same feature that, at first, made the student protest movement so traditional in its early phases. Despite the revolutionary upheavals of defeat and occupation, West Germany in 1960 remained a remarkably conservative, even authoritarian society. The universities had changed little since the early nineteenth century. As Germany adjusted to life in postwar Europe, economically affluent but politically weak, German intellectuals and students sensed a growing discrepancy between the institutions they lived in and the wider world, especially the world exemplified by the United States. The degree to which America was a model to young Germans in the early 1960s is scarcely conceivable to us now, when we are liable to think of young Germans as "Greens" protesting American presidents and missile deployments. In Germany, modernism—in the shape of a more casual, egalitarian style of behavior, freedom from conservative constraints in scholarship and debate, and freedom from deference to paternal figures—was a time bomb waiting to explode. And, of course, it had a highly combustible element: the moral indignation of young Germans at the perceived failure of their fathers to atone for National Socialism.

The bomb went off in a series of landmark events from 1962 to 1968. In 1962, the German government tried to discipline the

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weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* for publishing military secrets. Its abject failure, and the resultant triumph of the journalistic Left, marked Germany's arrival in the league of countries for whom authority seemed to rest in the democracy of "public opinion" rather than in the metaphysical supremacy of the state.

In late 1966 the student movement entered its radical phase when the two major political parties, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, joined forces. This union left the role of official opposition to the tiny Free Democrats. They were themselves in the middle of a sharp leftward lurch, fast becoming something much closer to a party of American left-wing liberals than the European-style party of classical liberals that they had formerly been.

At any rate, Rudi Dutschke, the leader of the Berlin students, proclaimed in the mid-Sixties that, since there was no truly democratic opposition in parliament, students must establish an extra-parliamentary opposition, the APO ("Ausserparlamentarische Opposition"). Like many West German radicals, Dutschke was a refugee from Communist-ruled East Germany. For a year and half he led German students in demonstration after demonstration, to protest professorial power, government policies, and Western attempts to exploit the Third World, the foremost example of which was, inevitably, the Vietnam War. As Rainer Bieling puts it in his somewhat sentimental review of this stage of the student movement: "How could the guardian angel of the Germans [i.e., the United States] have political and moral integrity if it was ruining a peasant people in Vietnam with devastating bombardments? If it was embracing the authoritarian regimes of South American dictators and even the Shah himself?"

It was the Shah who unwittingly marked the turn that ultimately split the German student movement into its reformist and terrorist wings. During his visit to Germany in June 1967 the Berlin police accidentally shot and killed a student, Benno Ohnesorg. In retaliation, the APO shut down universities throughout Germany for much of the next academic year. In the spring of 1968 more fuel was added to the fire when the German parliament debated a constitutional amendment providing the government with special powers in the event of a national emergency. In the middle of the Easter demonstration season, a right-wing house painter in Berlin shot and wounded Dutschke, thereby confirming the radicals' view that there could be no compromise with established society. Dutschke, permanently disabled, retired to Denmark, where he died a decade later. Meanwhile, many of his followers moved sharply left, rejected any compromise with the democratic system, and submerged themselves in an underworld of Maoist and Stalinist sects. Others judged that the only response to the "structural violence" of the state was violence of their own in the form of terrorism. Andreas Baader, a high-school dropout, and Gudrun Ensslin, a schoolteacher, set fire to department stores in Frankfurt and Brussels in that same spring of 1968. By late 1969, the umbrella organization of the German student movement was dead. It had had the same initials as its American counterpart—SDS—and fell apart for similar reasons, namely that its members could not decide whether they should tolerate constitutional democracy or reject it.

Among the majority that decided for toleration was Rainer Bieling. *Die Tränen der Revolution* is his devastating attack on those who remained true to the radical cause. In Bieling's view, they overpoliticized the student Left after 1968. Frustrated by the failure of their rebellion to bring about radical change in society, the leaders of the German SDS and its successor groups decided to rally the proletariat. They ended up merely aping them with the ideological oddity known as "workerism": the belief that, university student or no, one must pretend that one belongs to the working class; one must dress like a worker, speak like a worker, live like a worker, and try to think like a worker. My own hazy recollections of

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student life in Denmark in 1970-71 are that the identical phenomenon occurred there, for about six months. The absurdity of it all is evident the moment you pause to think that at this precise juncture in all Western countries the number of old-fashioned blue-collar workers was falling faster than ever before, giving way to a new white-collar service sector. Somehow, the workerists never figured out how to integrate this new class, or how to adjust their own world view to account for it. Instead, they surrendered ideological ascendancy to interest groups tied to the established unions and social democratic parties.

Bieling notes correctly that, for the student movement, workerism was the beginning of the end. It repelled the next generation of students. They in turn staged their own rebellion under the twin banners of punk rock and yuppie materialism. This upset the generation of 1968, many of whom had meanwhile become radicals with comfortable, tenured positions at major universities. "The tragic consciousness of the 1968'ers is fed by a double guilt feeling, not only of having failed, but of profiting from that failure," Bieling writes. "They have made their accommodation, but with their stomachs, not with their heads. Their stomachs swell with the privileges of the here and now, their heads remain lost in the yesterday of a tomorrow that had no future to begin with."

This is also the condition of the army of 1968 in America, now teaching the gospel of anti-Americanism from the pulpits of America's universities. But there is a difference. Because the German student movement was from the beginning locked far more firmly within the iron cage of Marxist ideology, the utter failure of that ideology across Europe has likewise discredited the movement's ideological underpinnings. You cannot harangue your students with a message of doom and revolution if the truth of that message depends on an ideology that is either completely out of date or a lie. Since the American movement was never as Marxist, it was less affected by Marxism's demise, and could continue its work in the guise of liberalism. That option was not available to the men and women of 1968 in Germany. They have had the simple choice of fleeing into the environmental, anti-nuclear leftism of the Green Party or coming to terms with constitutional democracy. As Bieling himself demonstrates, many have chosen the path of democracy.

If the ideas of 1968 won in America and reached a stalemate in Germany, they were soundly defeated in France. But then the mix of ideas was different in France from what it was in the other two countries. In America an ideologically unsophisticated radicalism triumphed; in Germany the radical element espoused a heavy-handed Marxism. In France, the reigning ideology was a combination of the Marxism of Louis Althusser, Sartrean existentialism, and a smattering of ideas derived from the anthropological and cultural theories of Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault. The combination produced a high-temperature fever from which few were immune in 1968 but which faded with unforeseen speed when the component ideologies disintegrated. Held together by a logic of mutual dependency, none of the three proved able to stand alone once that logic began to unravel, as it did around 1975.

According to Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut in *La Pensée 68*, the sentiment common to all these ideological theories was "anti-humanism," which they define as the conviction that Enlightenment humanism, with its faith in human reason as the foundation of social and political order and of culture, had failed. (Note the contrast to Germany, where, according to Bieling, some of the movement's leaders of 1968 imagined themselves to be perfecting, not denying, the Enlightenment.) As Ferry and Renaut show, the followers of Althusser, Derrida, Sartre, and Foucault felt that humanism had failed because it was scientifically false, because it had not prevented colonialism, imperialism,

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and Nazi totalitarianism. Even the rights of man, proclaimed by none other than the revolutionary National Assembly in France in 1789, were seen to be a sham. The radicals of '68 called for a new social order utterly different from that of the existing liberal society, which their mentors had so successfully de-legitimized. Foucault had shown that the idea of man as the subject of history was itself an historical construct, belonging to the epoch of European expansion and imperialism. Following Freud, Jacques Lacan had shown that humanism was, at best, camouflage for ruthless and sinister drives for domination. Althusser, finally, had shown that the march of history toward a collectivist future turned not on any romantic faith in human potential but on the iron laws of class struggle.

Ferry and Renaut rightly designate Claude Lévi-Strauss as one of the master thinkers behind the upheaval of 1968. And yet in 1987 it turned out that, whatever the effect of his ideas on the student movement, Lévi-Strauss himself was far from endorsing its actions. In an interview in that year he stated unambiguously that May 1968 had "repelled" him. Pressed by an incredulous interviewer to admit that "you must have been seduced by that moment of innovation, of imagination," the crusty anthropologist spelled out his position:

> I can't accept cutting down trees to build barricades (trees are life, and worthy of respect), or making trash heaps out of public places that are a common good and a common responsibility, or covering university or other buildings with graffiti. Nor can I accept that intellectual work and the operation of established institutions should be paralyzed by rhetorical battles . . . . For me, May 1968 represented one more step down a ladder of degradation of the universities that had begun long before. Already in high school I told myself that my generation, myself included, could not stand comparison with that of Bergson, Proust, Durkheim at the same age. I don't believe that May 1968 destroyed the university, but rather that May 1968 took place because the university had destroyed itself.

When Lévi-Strauss made these comments, of course, the radical anti-humanism of 1968 was long dead. It began to die when French intellectuals discovered Soviet totalitarianism as a consequence of reading Solzhenitsyn in the mid-1970s. Raymond Aron, the great liberal who had never succumbed in the least to anti-humanism, pointed out acerbically at the time that this discovery came a little late, given that there was full evidence of Soviet atrocities in the 1940s, and even earlier for those who were alert to it. The history of ideological fashions, however, shows clearly that facts, no matter how momentous, have no public effect if the political culture is not disposed to accept them. French political culture in the late 1940s and 1950s had been controlled by the Communist Party and its sympathizers, like Sartre, who vindictively silenced people who told the truth about the Soviet Union. By the mid-1970s, however, the cultural hegemony of the Party was weakening, partly thanks to the growing number of East European and, later, Southeast Asian refugees in French academic and cultural life. It should also be added that in France the movement of 1968 was somewhat more genuinely anti-authoritarian than it was in either America or Germany. There was less of that double standard by which authoritarianism of the Left is judged on its promises of liberation, whereas liberal democracy is judged by its alleged failure to perform.

In any case, the discovery of the moral bankruptcy of the Left in France was all the more effective for being late. Within months, it seemed, first Marxism, then existentialism, and finally structuralism in its vulgar version lost their moral standing, their intellectual appeal, their credibility. The rights of man returned triumphant as French scholars and politicians made statement upon statement denouncing Soviet tyranny in Eastern Europe, the Vietnamese and Cambodian gulags and holocausts, and the complicity of

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European and American liberals in bringing them about. By 1980, France was swept clean of the effects of the fever of 1968. It was a final irony of history that the very country that saw the most extreme excesses of student behavior and rhetoric—leaving aside the terrorism in Germany and Italy—also saw the most extreme defeat of the ideologies that motivated them.

Of course, the French did not rediscover natural rights and the virtues of humanistic democracy only because they began reading Soviet dissidents or because they found some internal, logical flaw in the grand structure of radical ideology. They were also acting out a public drama. To a large extent the posture of 1968 was theater, in the best traditions of French public rhetoric since the seventeenth century. How intimately these two impulses were related—the wish for both radical commitment and the drama of proclaiming an *idéologie de choc*—can be seen in the recent astonishing revelations about the private thoughts of Louis Althusser, that most relentless and stern of anti-humanist Marxists.

Althusser plays an interesting part in *Un siècle, une vie* ("A Century, A Life"), the memoir of the Catholic philosopher Jean Guitton, who was for a few years in the 1930s Althusser's teacher and thereafter his friend. Guitton deduces that Althusser was driven by a deep need to carry Marxism to such an extreme that it would become for him a substitute for the mysticism he had abandoned when he left the Catholic Church at the age of twenty.[2] In 1980, Althusser's wife Hélène, whom he was shortly to murder "in a fit of passion," confessed to Guitton that the two of them had decided long ago to "forego all worldly honor" and to consecrate themselves to the Absolute. This unconditional commitment to a logic of history above human logic was the key to Althusser's Marxism, and the secret of the powerful attraction it exercised on so many young radicals around 1968. In 1974, Althusser acknowledged to Guitton that he was "considered a dogmatist." But this, he said, was unavoidable, for "I note that the philosophies that have had the most effect in history . . . were dogmatic." To admit doubts, in other words, was to ruin beforehand the public effect of one's ideas. Althusser maintained that once a philosopher published his thoughts he no longer had the right to cast doubt on them.

Given this mystical ideology, it was not surprising that Althusser, by the time of his final collapse (in the form of schizophrenic psychosis, which relieved him of criminal culpability in his wife's murder), had come to believe that the crisis of human history was imminent, and that the salvation of the world lay in an alliance of Communism and Catholicism, of Moscow and Rome.

There is, obviously, a vivid contrast between Althusser's political mysticism—indeed, the entire intellectual debate of the European Left—and the more mundane concerns of the New Left in America. This contrast has been concisely documented in a recent *Salmagundi* symposium on the Sixties (Winter, 1989). Perhaps more than the Unger, Caute, and Kaiser books, the *Salmagundi* essays give us a sense of how the proud veterans of the New Left in America differ from their European counterparts and of what they see the legacy of the Sixties to be.

Ellen Willis, a senior editor at the *Village Voice*, leads off the symposium with an essay that focuses on her own liberal guilt as a privileged activist in the late 1960s. It is the sort of exasperating piece that prompts the reader who has never had the time or, perhaps, the opportunity to feel liberal guilt to ask what possible interest such revelations can have, apart from causing ridicule among more serious revolutionaries. Willis is followed by a member of the Old Left, the sociologist Norman Birnbaum, who from his position at Georgetown University's law school tells us that we need "a new New Left." Julius Lester, the black professor of

2 *Un siècle, une vie*, by Jean Guitton; Laffont (Paris), 1988.

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Jewish studies at the University of Massachusetts who was recently read out of the progressive ranks by other blacks for defending Judaism, offers the only piece in the collection that ventures to defy the mainstream orthodoxy, albeit obliquely: he illustrates, by example and recollection, that the 1960s was a time when many people really believed that civil rights might lead to a multi-racial society, instead of to the self-imposed segregation, group-rights thinking, and black racism of today.

The best summary of the 1968 ideology, however, is Benjamin Barber's essay. Barber, the Walt Whitman professor of humanities at Rutgers University, notes complacently that "the generation that challenged the professoriate twenty years ago is today itself the professoriate . . . . The long hairs have gone gray but the ideals that inflamed these now balding pates continue to infuse sociology lectures on mutualism and political science seminars exploring Green politics or revisioned [*sic*] feminist liberation."

Coming from the white male holder of a named chair in a prestigious university, this profession of radical faith is a tempting target of critical deconstruction. Bearing in mind the sound and as yet uncontroverted Marxist principle that the ruling educational ideas of the age are always the ideas of the rulers of education, I offer the following deconstruction of Professor Barber's views:

> Twenty years ago, I and my friends discovered that our professors were wimps. They didn't really believe in their own authority over us, they had no intention of taking any risks for Western democracy, and they certainly weren't for American power. Why, any fool with half a slogan in his head could make them agree that the Vietnam War was wrong in the space of two minutes! Now we also saw that these professors lived well, had nice houses and so forth, and didn't have to work hard. So we decided we wanted a part of it. All we had to do was yell slogans about imperialism and chauvinism, and by God they gave us the store! All of it! There we were, with tenure after a dissertation and two articles! And you know what else; once they'd hired us, they considerately shut the door on new recruits so nobody could threaten our guild's hold on power. Of course we have to go on talking the same garbage we did twenty years ago, but who cares? Incidentally, we did invent one new gimmick. These days, it's really important to go on about racism and sexism. It's safe, too, even for a white guy like me, as long as you have tenure.

Professor Barber's essay lends itself splendidly to such translations. In substance, it is an attack on cultural conservatives—Allan Bloom, William Bennett, and the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre—for stealing the Left's thunder. Professor Barber, it appears, has discovered that American students in the 1980s are more interested in wealth and status than in culture. Bloom and Bennett have blamed this development on Professor Barber and other members of the 1968 generation who discarded the traditional curriculum of liberal education and alienated the young from serious learning—even as they gave their students a gloss of ritualistic leftism.

Mr. Barber pleads not guilty to this charge, at least on some counts. According to him it is the conservative reactionaries of the 1970s who taught the young to be greedy. The legacy of the 1960s, by contrast, is the "critical" university, which has replaced an earlier university whose only function, according to Barber, was to socialize students into being loyal and unquestioning citizens.

This is a neat turn of the argument, since in fact it is Mr. Barber and his ilk who have used the university as a smoothly functioning engine of socialization. The dogma being unquestionably accepted this time around, however, is the dogma of the post-Sixties Left. The result is that curious and eminently useful creature, the contemporary middle-class American, with his conventionally middle-class mores—lots of exercise, no smoking, only a little drinking, and at least one money-market fund—and his second-

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hand New Left opinions about foreign policy, domestic politics, big business, and the big wide world. By contrast, the contemporary middle-class European holds quite firmly to the hedonism of the 1960s while rejecting with fair consistency the political world view of 1968. There are exceptions on both continents, to be sure, but in general the American New Left has produced a generation of healthy and effective consumers of bland anti-Americanism.

Mr. Barber demonstrates in his essay just how far liberalism has come since the days when liberals stood for American power abroad and equality of opportunity at home. He declares that the contemporary university is "in the hands of adults" who "believe in equality, in disarmament, in tolerance, and in social justice, gender justice, racial justice, and a variety of other contemporary justices." A visitor from Mars might plausibly take these phrases at face value and conclude that these were honorable and civilized purposes. In fact, unless Mr. Barber's ideology is really quite different from what it appears to be, he is not advocating what these phrases might traditionally have connoted but something very different.

For a proper measure of the Sixties legacy it bears repeating that for Mr. Barber and his soul mates in the academy (and media) "equality" means equality of result, to be measured crudely by the number of persons of a given sex or color to be found in a given occupation; "disarmament" means isolationism, and the end of any pretense that America stands for liberty in the world; "social justice" means egalitarianism; "gender justice" means learning to say "chairperson" without visibly wincing and in general conducting oneself so as to appease the feminist groups without actually doing anything drastic, like giving one's job to a woman (other people's jobs are another matter). "Racial justice" and the other "justices" have analogous meanings.

Mr. Barber is honest enough to admit that the New Left, to which he evidently still belongs, subordinated "scholarship to a political struggle for justice." Indeed it did. One is reminded of another such subordination, from a different time and different political orientation. I am thinking of Martin Heidegger in 1933, when he proclaimed that Adolf Hitler was the incarnation of absolute justice. Why should anyone believe that Mr. Barber's "justice," as the ideological cloak of certain special interests, is better than Heidegger's, which, as Mr. Barber would surely want to claim, was in fact mere tyranny? By what standard can he maintain that his political definition of justice is morally superior to Heidegger's, when there is no place for such judgments in his philosophy?

Of course, in his own opinion, Mr. Barber stands for progress, whereas Heidegger and the Nazis were reactionary (never mind that the slogan of 1933 was "the German revolution has begun!"). He admits that modernity has undermined traditional values, but cannot bring himself to support those, like Bloom and Bennett, who want at least to tell students what the tradition was so that they can choose for themselves whether to accept or reject it. Rather, he speaks vaguely of creating a new basis for social cohesion by "forging an art of politics capable of holding together and giving meaning to beings emancipated from the roots that once imprisoned their spirits even as it grounded their values."

I think that Mr. Barber is being entirely honest in this statement of purpose. It may lend itself to ironical translation, but underneath there is a serious world view, one that I, for one, happen to find so obviously false that I cannot understand how anyone can seriously adopt it. The key is the idea that "roots," meaning a strong cultural tradition, "imprison the spirit." Why? Surely the lesson of high civilization from earliest antiquity to the day before yesterday is that the spirit is freed, not imprisoned, by culture, by a close familiarity with one's own tradition. G. K. Chesterton's saying that tradition is the democracy of the dead was never more relevant than in the conflict with today's sloganeers of equality, who trash the history

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and achievements of the West in the name of global democracy. Another, now somewhat unfashionable, way of putting the essential role of culture as part of a fully human nature is to cite Sigmund Freud: civilization is sublimation. Like culture in society at large, adulthood and maturity in the individual are the fertile products of a tension between the demands of tradition and the impulses of individuality. Unrestrained by culture, those impulses often regress either to infantilism, as they did for many members of the New Left, or to fanatical barbarism, as they do for many ruling elites in the Third World today.

Furthermore, all cultures teach that you have to know where you come from before you know who you are. Western culture further teaches that, when you do know who you are, then and only then do you have the right and the authority to reject the past or to build up on it. Only the modern West offers this unique option, which is why, *pace* Mr. Barber and the New Left, it is indeed a culture of universal value.

Neither the *Salmagundi* contributors nor Caute, Kaiser, and the Ungers display any understanding of this heritage or indeed any sense of the threat it faces. The English-language writers, all belonging to what Europeans bitingly call the "pink bourgeoisie," rest safely in the knowledge—belief, rather—that the movement of 1968 was a great step forward in the struggle against injustice and barbarism. Nothing in that movement or its aftermath can or will threaten them, they think; rather, what they resent is that the ideas of 1968 have not been universally victorious. Their position reminds me very much of the position taken by the American Catholic bishops in their 1983 pastoral letter. In that letter, largely written, not coincidentally, by a full-fledged representative of the post-1968 establishment view of American power and its evils, the bishops denounced the strategy of nuclear deterrence while ignoring completely the likely consequences of a further weakening of American power. One French bishop remarked that the document was obviously the work of people whose material safety and freedom had never been seriously threatened, and who expected no such threat in the future.

This is perhaps the key to the difference between the American and the European lessons of 1968 as they emerge from the writings under review. The French and German writers, who present their accounts with distance, irony, and a sure sense that the events of 1968 were not necessarily signs of progress toward more humanity, more justice, or more freedom, take less for granted. In short, they realize that any political movement carries costs, and no such movement is without its ambiguities and risks. The reader finds no trace of such a sense in Caute, Kaiser, Birnbaum, Barber, or Willis. Rather, there are good guys and there are bad guys, unambiguously distinguishable by their support of or opposition to reason, justice, and liberation—as defined by the men and women of 1968. It is precisely this smug self-righteousness, and the intolerance that inevitably accompanies it, that has come to characterize so much elite opinion in the United States today. From newspaper editorial offices to college classrooms, the progressives of the Eighties have accepted the radical agenda of the Sixties as a kind of unchallengeable fact of nature. In too many cases, their own agenda is to destroy the very possibility that anyone might ever know that there is another truth than theirs.

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Toscanini and the love of great music

by Samuel Lipman

Once upon a time, the work of great musical performers died with them. It is true that, for a few years after the death of these giants, the memories of admirers served to grant these titans a spectral presence. But soon even the most tireless fans also went on to their reward, and nothing remained of their heroes but more or less passing mentions in ephemeral periodicals and dusty histories. It has been argued, not altogether convincingly, that this rule of forgetfulness meant a better time for music, for the presence of the illustrious dead had no power to overshadow the struggling work of living performers. Perhaps more important, it is often suggested that when the work of performers died with them the way was clear for a proper and continuing attention to be given to the music of living composers.

It is hardly a secret that this obligatory sentence of oblivion no longer obtains. Through the miracle of sound recording, the reality of the best work of the most distinguished performers is available, on the whole in ever-improved technological form. Indeed, through the preservation of radio broadcasts from a time unlike ours, when the commercial media felt some responsibility for the diffusion of high culture, a wealth of hitherto forgotten musical treasures has been re-discovered and brought to market.

If tenor Enrico Caruso, now helped by computer-aided sonic reconstruction, remains the prime beneficiary of the very primitive acoustic recording process that flowered in the first quarter of the century, it is clear that Arturo Toscanini, aided mightily by the collateral phenomenon of radio, remains perhaps the prime beneficiary of electrical recording. I have seen it stated that Toscanini sold some twenty million records before his death in 1957, most of them doubtless LPs. Since then, his records have never ceased to be popular. The latest Schwann artist catalogue, very much an incomplete source, contains more than forty Toscanini entries, many of them on the now triumphant compact disc. Indeed, the parallel with the Italian super-tenor holds for the Italian super-conductor; for a new generation of music lovers, Caruso remains the archetypal tenor, and Toscanini remains the archetypal conductor.

It is curious that an age so given to the whorish adoration of fame and glamour as ours should also specialize in what can only be called the shattering of idols. The same approach that has raked up so much muck about our political leaders is now being applied to a once-sacrosanct class of artists. Even the sainted Mozart was fair game in Peter Shaffer's hit play (and movie) *Amadeus*, emerging as the very model of the child-in-the-artist. Worse yet, from the musico-Freudian netherworld can presently be heard rumblings connecting Schubert with a life of sexual inversion.

All this has recently come home to the admirers of Toscanini with the publication of Joseph Horowitz's much-discussed

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Understanding Toscanini: How He Became an American Culture-God and Helped Create a New Audience for Old Music (1987). This lengthy book, a sociological tract in the guise of a musical, biographical, and historical study, made three major attacks on the conductor, only two of them contained in the ponderous subtitle. The attack that went unmentioned on the title page was the purely musical element in a book which ended up having rather little to do with music *qua* music: I refer to Mr. Horowitz's pervasive unhappiness with the presenting face of Toscanini's music-making, a face which only grew clearer as the conductor grew older. Even on the evidence Mr. Horowitz presents, this critical unhappiness with Toscanini the musician had always existed; it is also only fair to add that the reaction to Mr. Horowitz's book has only shown that there are new recruits to the pro- and anti-Toscanini parties, not that musical opinions about the conductor have themselves changed over the better part of a century.

There are many ways of describing Toscanini's way of performing music: it has been called "objective" because of its seeming literalness, "exciting" because of its ability to communicate a quality of total integration and concentration, "Italianate" because of its emphasis on melodic clarity rather than harmonic richness, "motoric" because of its tendency to find and keep one tempo, and "willful" because of its tendency to concentrate attention on the orders of the conductor rather than on the instincts of the individual orchestral musicians. There is no reason here to point out the manifest contradictions among these various appellations; suffice it to say that all of them, taken together and shorn of their pejorative implications, serve to sum up how we identify a Toscanini performance. That Mr. Horowitz has in general a low opinion of most of these performances, that on the whole he would prefer the very different sound (for example) of Wilhelm Furtwängler, serves as much as a characterization of his musical taste as of Toscanini's work. This is as it should be, and it would be supererogatory for me to behave as if Arturo Toscanini needed *musical* defense from Mr. Horowitz's charges. In this matter, with such recordings as Toscanini made, even the best musical lawyers are surely unnecessary.

In any case, it is my impression that most of the reviewers of *Understanding Toscanini* concentrated the major part of their attention on the conductor's status as a performer, and on the author's accuracy in assessing that status. Unfortunately, this narrow concentration tended to overshadow the two rather less easily demonstrated charges that Mr. Horowitz placed in his subtitle. It will therefore be my concern here to deal with the wider accusations, at once musical and cultural, that Mr. Horowitz levels against Toscanini.

The first of these two charges, and for me the less interesting, is that Toscanini collaborated with, and even cunningly manipulated, the glorification of his personal image that was such a significant factor in his career at least from his arrival at the Metropolitan Opera in 1908 to his death almost fifty years later. I suppose there can be little doubt that had Toscanini been a *gemütlich* conductor, his publicity would have reflected that fact; had he felt the musical tastes of his colleagues to have been more valuable than his own, he would have followed their tastes, not his own; had he not wished to perform before a large public, he would have refused to do so; had he not wished to earn high fees, he would not have charged them; had he not wished to make recordings, he would not have made them, and would certainly not have made so many of them. In other words, had Toscanini been different, he would have been someone else. It seems to me that there is in life a rough equivalence between professional bent, private personality, and public image, and it further seems to me that when we are considering a career extending over decades that equivalence becomes a virtual congruence. I would further say that even the most powerful—and often from my standpoint

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the most malign—engines of publicity manifest a deeper, though often unpalatable, truth about their beneficiaries.

The point of all this is that it seems futile to ask that Toscanini, given that he was the musician and the person that he was, should have chosen a different way to make the public career that clearly was his *raison d'être*. It is thus my sense that the Toscanini who can be seen in the remarkable Hupka photographs on RCA record jackets, and the Toscanini who was ballyhooed by NBC as the world's greatest conductor conducting the world's greatest orchestra and who was, in Mr. Horowitz's ambivalent coinage, perceived as a "Culture-God," was the very same Toscanini we still hear today on records. And so it all does seem to come down to a musical judgment: what do you think of Toscanini, not as a "Culture-God," but as a conductor?

Mr. Horowitz's second charge against Toscanini, presented in his subtitle as "How He . . . Helped Create a New Audience for Old Music," strikes me as rather more significant. This charge takes many forms, even on occasion becoming vastly patronizing, as when Mr. Horowitz remarks early on that Toscanini became "the dominant figurehead for Great Music." But perhaps the most complete formulation occurs in an attack on several music critics of the day, all supporters of Toscanini and therefore among the book's chief villains. I will quote from this attack at length not just because it is an excellent summary of the position but because it well conveys the rhetorically supercharged atmosphere of *Understanding Toscanini*:

> The argument now emerging was that only great music was good enough for a great conductor. The Toscanini disciples would become guardians of a canon of masterpieces—in [*Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and later *Nation* critic B.H.] Haggin's phrase, "the finest, the greatest music"—of which Toscanini was the one great purveyor. This holy of holies—even Beethoven's Violin Concerto and the "Pastoral" Symphony could not gain admittance—would comprise the best of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, and Wagner, with gilding by Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Debussy, and Richard Strauss. No premiere, no enterprising revival could give greater pleasure than a certified major work. As [*New York Times* critic Olin] Downes put it upon hearing Toscanini conduct *Ein Heldenleben* following seventeen Philharmonic performances under three conductors the preceding eight seasons: "Mr. Toscanini interpreted the score for the first time in New York, and a first time by Toscanini can well be more important than a novel composition."

Mr. Horowitz's next words draw the net, or perhaps the noose, tightly around the conductor: "To give Toscanini his due, notwithstanding his admitted weakness for Italian cameos, he stuck as close to the canon of acknowledged masterpieces as any disciple could have reasonably desired."

There are other targets than mere music critics in Mr. Horowitz's cast of villains. He has a particularly angry pen for "music appreciation," which he seems to see as no more than the teaching of pap to pups. He takes particular pleasure in attacking the conductor Walter Damrosch, who became what we would today call a media personality by being the avuncular host of the long-running weekly daytime radio program "The NBC Music Appreciation Hour." For Mr. Horowitz, Damrosch

> was in some respects all too plausible. His paternal manner (he began each lesson by intoning "Good morning, my dear children!") made him seem even older than he was. His German pedigree (born in Breslau, trained in Dresden) made him seem the more distant . . . . For his young listeners Damrosch's distant yet soothing aura pervaded the music he appreciated. He taught music listening, not music making. Moreover, he prescribed a pantheon of dead Germans and Austrians . . . . When in 1932 Leopold Stokowski proposed broadcasting "modernistic" music to

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> children so they could "develop a liking for it," Damrosch issued a press release "deeply deploring" Stokowski's plan. "Children should not be confused by experiments," he wrote. For Damrosch's schoolchildren, music as a contemporary art form ceased to exist except as a dilute residue of the nineteenth century.

I might add that Mr. Horowitz not only castigates the broadcasting of Damrosch's educational programs, but also goes on to attack RCA for its nineteenth-century-based music appreciation efforts and Hollywood movies for their use of classical sound track material. I must say that these strictures, when written and read in today's debased cultural atmosphere, seem nothing if not bizarre. Perhaps Dante's immortal words in the *Purgatorio* apply here as so often elsewhere in life: *Nessun maggior dolore,/che ricordarsi del tempo felice/nella miseria* ("There is no greater sorrow than to recall a time of happiness when in misery").

Mr. Horowitz, having tied together Toscanini, his critical supporters, the network that made possible his concerts, and the label that sold his records—and even the film industry that capitalized on the resulting popularity of classical music—is ready for his culminating charge against what he sees as the Toscanini cult, disciples and all:

> At least five worlds of American music were omitted from the curricula of music appreciation and of the Toscanini cult . . . . The first was . . . the come-of-age American composers of the twenties and thirties . . . . The second was a maverick sidebar to the first: rangy American originals in the tradition of Whitman and Melville, beginning with Charles Ives and including Edgard Varèse, Harry Partch, and John Cage. The third . . . was of American musical theater: Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers. The fourth—endorsed by [the quarterly review] *Modern Music*, Ives, and Gershwin, denigrated by highbrow music appreciators—was jazz, its precursors and forms: gospel, blues, ragtime, swing. The fifth . . . [is] the most thorough attack on the "masterwork" idea, with its elaborate distinctions between "serious" and "popular," "art" and "recreation" . . . . [I]t prophetically embraced the music of Asia, Africa, and South America, accommodating listening modes more meditative or ceremonial than those of the modern West.

Here, finally, is the material to support Mr. Horowitz's earlier explanation for the course American serious music took after World War II:

> Ultimately repulsed by music appreciation's new audience, and influenced by transplanted Europeans uninterested in helping to cultivate the nascent American school, future American composers would increasingly follow Schoenberg's dictum that "All I know is that [the listener] exists, and insofar as he isn't indispensable for acoustical reasons (since music doesn't sound well in an empty hall), he's only a nuisance."

Thus Toscanini, because of his actions and the actions of those who stood with him, symbolized and indeed was partially responsible for a conscious rejection of major and important segments of the musical repertory, and therefore for the eventual atrophy of that repertory. If we take only the last part of this charge—the diagnosis of the present state of serious music rather than the account of how we got here—I think it is clear that Mr. Horowitz is right. The repertory *has* atrophied. Masterpieces, or what passes for them, are now central to concert programs and opera seasons. Great careers are now made only in old music, never in new. Despite all the performances that new works now receive, American music remains a stepchild of performers, administrators, and audiences; such new music as is scheduled is placed in juxtaposition to familiar works of proven attractiveness. In my own work as the director of a smallish music festival, I have found that the pressure in chamber and orchestral concerts to program the best-known compositions, played by the best-known soloists, is close to irresistible.

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Here we are: but how did we get here? It is in attempting to answer this question that I think Mr. Horowitz most goes awry. Let me say at the outset that I think he goes so badly awry for two reasons: he vastly underestimates the role that *composers* have in deciding what kind of music they write, and he ignores the role that masterpieces of art, whether musical, literary, or visual, play in ensuring the continuation of civilization.

To begin with the role of composers in determining their own fate: there can be no doubt that most, if not all, composers mean for their music to be heard; they write for an audience that will appreciate their pieces during their lifetimes, and, I am convinced, for a posterity that will honor their memory by loving their music after they are dead. There can also be no doubt that being neglected is immensely painful for any creative figure. There can be no doubt that composers are happiest when their music is played, and played widely.

But—and here the qualification is all-important—it would be a great mistake to jump from this common-sense observation to the conclusion that the happiest composers are the greatest composers, that the existence of genius is a matter of being "stroked." For it is a fact that *what* composers write, and *how* they write, is in the most important sense determined primarily by what is *inside* them, not by what is *outside*. Some composers—Prokofiev comes immediately to mind—are extraordinarily dependent on the possibility of an appreciative audience; others—and surely Schoenberg takes pride of place here—give up assured success in one style to court disaster in another. In this way, as in every other, composers differ among themselves. The fact that composers *choose* how they shall appear to the world is what we mean by a composer's individuality or his personality. These two much abused terms are merely attempts at defining just what it is that sets one composer apart from another.

Composers—especially the most gifted composers—write what they want to write, and labor mightily to make a world for themselves where what they write can live. Unlike today's visual-arts vanguard, which seems to thrive on the gulling of a ravenous public, the musical avant-garde did not arise because there was a ready market for its products. The ready market has always been, and is now, for comfortable, familiar music. After all, Toscanini's wildly successful performances of the Barber *Adagio for Strings* hardly produced a flood of what might be called Barberian high romanticism in American music. For the best composers, the course of musical composition has been a matter of composers' choice, not of performers' or of audience's.

The sad fact is that the shortfall in new music that so bothers Mr. Horowitz is a worldwide phenomenon and affects musical environments unpenetrated by the Toscanini magic. It is my own opinion that the seeds of the present condition of music were sown as far back as the nineteenth century, and chief among them was the ever-proliferating luxuriance of harmonic texture that marked the final development of consonant chromaticism. When music became maximally beautiful at each and every moment, as it finally did around the turn of our century in Central Europe—*Verklärte Nacht* (1899) and the *Gurrelieder* (1901-1913) of Schoenberg are towering examples of this culmination—sophisticated composers felt they had little choice but to react against the very idea of beauty itself. How audiences and performers reacted to this development in musical composition is a matter, if my pun may be forgiven, of record.

Let us return to Toscanini. What was he to do when he was faced, at middle age, with the prospect of there being very little new music to which he could make his full personal commitment? He did play much music written during his lifetime and in his own milieu: his services to Verdi, Boito, Puccini, and Catalani, among others, are well known. And what Toscanini played he played with his full heart and his full mind, not, as is the case with today's superstars, with one eye on the pre-concert publicity and

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the other on the departing plane schedule. Would it have helped music if Toscanini had anticipated Leonard Bernstein at the New York Philharmonic during the 1960s, programming works that he felt himself obliged to mock and demean in pre-concert introductions? Should Toscanini have concerned himself with the works of John Cage, or with Cole Porter, or with swing, or with Balinese gamelan music, to take examples from the musical areas Mr. Horowitz finds were neglected under Toscanini's baneful influence? Surely Cole Porter and swing were brilliantly successful without any help from Toscanini or from anyone like him; John Cage has triumphantly shown that one can be called a composer without composing very many notes of one's own; Balinese music, like other great expressions of distant folk cultures, remains of interest precisely to the extent it is kept distinct from alien musical influences—especially ours.

What then, I repeat, was Toscanini to do? His response, true as he was to himself as an artist, was straightforward: because as he grew older he could not make music out of the present, he chose to make music out of the past.[1] Here new questions arise. Was he culpable for this decision? Should he have performed new works in which he could not believe, rather than old works in which he did believe? Put another way, what is the responsibility of the most gifted performers, faced as they have been for some years now with a great past, a clouded present, and an unknown future? Perhaps the best way to begin to answer this question about musical responsibility is to talk about two duties rather than one: the duty to the old, and the duty to the new.

We might begin with the matter of duty to the old. The great period of Western musical composition, by which I mean the writing by individuals of extended works of permanent and well-nigh incontestable value, took place from the last years of the sixteenth century to just after World War I, or, in other words, from the time of Monteverdi to perhaps the time of Ravel. In these little more than four hundred years, the music that had originated in individual expression, particularism, and contemporaneity became marked by universality, widespread relevance, and timelessness. This completed phenomenon can justly be called the creation of a major part of our civilization.

A sizable portion of this aspect of civilization is the music written for the symphony orchestra and the opera company; its heroic figures, I need hardly say, are Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, Wagner and Verdi. These are the geniuses, and theirs is the achievement, that Toscanini honored throughout his long career. In zealously concentrating on this music of the past and in educating his audience in it, he paid the greatest tribute to the civilization that is by definition made up of the validated accomplishments of a former time. If we as a society—and if great musical executants as the representatives of art—have the duty to make the corpus of civilization available to everyone, then in giving engrossing performances of the highest masterpieces Toscanini was undertaking a vitally necessary activity—not just for himself and for his own career, but for us all.

But what of the duty to the new? How is that duty to be accomplished? There are those who think that the salvation of music as a whole lies in the indiscriminate programming of *all* new music. On this analysis, it is precisely the duty of performers—and by extension the duty of audiences—*not* to make distinctions among different genres

1 I have adapted this idea from Virgil Thomson's perceptive remarks about Stravinsky: "After giving to the world between 1909 and 1913 three proofs of colossally expanding powers—*Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and the *Rite of Spring*—he found himself unable to expand farther. And since, like Picasso, he was still to go on living, and since he could not imagine living without making music, he too was faced with an unhappy choice. He could either make music out of his own past (which he disdained to do) or out of music's past, which he is still [in 1967] doing."

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and qualities of music. Instead, the proper mode of advocacy and response is to be all-inclusive and all-accepting.

It is this kind of thinking that sees the future of chamber music in the Kronos Quartet's combination of John Zorn and Béla Bartók, the future of opera in the New York City Opera's combination of Sigmund Romberg and Arnold Schoenberg, and the future of orchestral music in the New York Philharmonic's combination of Gerry Mulligan and Beethoven. Also according to this school of thought, there is nothing wrong with placing the rawest new music on programs cheek by jowl with the greatest masterpieces of the tradition. Such a juxtaposition is meant to demonstrate that the new is fully the equal of the old, and at the same time to cut the old down to proper size. Unfortunately, this misguided effort to advance the unfamiliar only succeeds in creating an affirmative action ghetto for new music, a ghetto richly funded and utterly unattended.

It is hardly surprising that this state of affairs seems intolerable to living composers; it is also difficult for those music lovers who cherish the excitement of the unfamiliar. If mere numbers of first performances were all that mattered, we would now have no problems, for never have so many new works been played. But it is clear that the more new works are played, the worse is the situation in which composition finds itself.

Earlier I tried to make the case that composition is a matter of the will of the composer, not the performer. But to say that the composer rather than the performer most importantly determines what is written is not to absolve the performer of all responsibility for what the listener hears. The performer's responsibility is primarily, I think, to the musical composition, and thus inferentially to the art of music itself. However well or ill our performers of today are discharging their responsibilities to past masterpieces, it seems to me incontestable that the best new music, or more exactly the best music of the entire twentieth century, is now being poorly served.

It is not that our most successful performers and institutions totally ignore this music; in fact, many of them program it: the star-studded Metropolitan Opera double bill of *Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung,* and the New York Philharmonic's contemporary music festivals of recent years, come immediately to mind. But the resulting performances are in the great majority of cases without penetration, without commitment, and without the kind of total absorption in the task that is necessary for doing *any* music. Above all, there is an absence of taking responsibility *sub specie aeternitatis* for what has been chosen and how it is done. The results of this easy and demeaning catholicity are all too palpable: frequent poor intonation, weak rhythm, and slack ensemble. Even when the mechanics are in place, there is a pervasive emptiness of character and spirit, and finally the communication of a not very subtle travesty of the original artworks. Is it any wonder that after such performances even sophisticated audiences cry "Send in the tunes!"?

It seems to me inescapable that new music requires of its performers the very same totality of dedication as old music, and that the newest work requires the same qualities of talent, character, and soul as the most acknowledged and familiar masterpieces. Here Toscanini's single-mindedness, so far from rendering him culpable for the present state of music, can provide a sure guide. For what really emerges from any study of Toscanini's work and life is not his undoubted ego, not his penchant for concentrating attention on himself, not his supreme irascibility, not his pleasure in living well, but rather the completeness of his commitment to his musical tasks. Proofs of this almost obsessive dedication abound, and they can be substantiated in the recollections of his orchestra players and in the recorded rehearsal excerpts now available. It is in the context of this dedication that we must hear, and I believe we must admire, Toscanini's frequent cries to the orchestra of *Vergogna!* ("Shame!")

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It would be wrong to conclude without remarking that the other side of Toscanini's readiness to find failed music performance shameful is the radiant quality which always impelled him to strive for the realization of his own best idea of perfection. This quality in Toscanini is love, the quality that, directed toward God, shapes, and finally closes, the *Divine Comedy* of Toscanini's transcendent compatriot, Dante. I have quoted Dante earlier, and I hope it will not seem presumptuous of me to quote in this context the last lines of the culminating *Paradiso*, written in the flowering of medieval Christianity:

> All' alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
> ma già volgeva il mio disiro e il *velle*,
> si come rota ch' egualmente è mossa,
> l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.
>
> (To the high fantasy here power failed; but
> already my desire and will were rolled—
> even as a wheel that moveth equally—by the
> love that moves the sun and the other stars.)

In the end, it is clear that what distinguished Arturo Toscanini was the burning quality of the love he demonstrated in his work, not the pleasure he took or the self-satisfaction he found in it. We can agree or disagree with his choices of repertory, as we can disagree with the way in which he performed that which he chose. What cannot be disputed, and what is so evident on his many recordings, is the strength of the tie that bound him to his music-making. In that strength, and in that tie, must be our model. To understand Arturo Toscanini is to know something of the love he felt for music.

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States of grace: the novels of William Maxwell

by Bruce Bawer

The simplest things are often not what they seem.
—William Maxwell, *The Château*

. . . who knows what oversensitive is, considering all there is to be sensitive to.
—William Maxwell, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*

In an age when editors of literary fiction increasingly prefer the sensationally modish to the quietly accomplished, when tastemakers at glossy magazines look upon twenty-eight-year-old first novelists as superannuated, and when supposedly serious critics neglect distinctive new novels in order to gush over the latest well-nigh interchangeable specimens of Brat Pack minimalism—in such an age, what could be more *démodé* than a thoroughgoing enthusiasm for William Maxwell?[1] For over half a century, Maxwell—now in his ninth decade—has gone his serene and unsplashy way, producing a new book every five years or so, all the while steadily accumulating one of the most admirable oeuvres in contemporary American letters. Though he could hardly be described as an unknown, Maxwell—who was born in 1908, and grew up in the Illinois town of Lincoln and in Chicago—has never enjoyed the fame of such contemporaries as, say, Richard Wright (b. 1908), Eudora Welty (b. 1909), or Mary McCarthy (b. 1912). Maxwell's fellow novelists and short-story writers (many of whom benefited from his decades of editorial service at *The New Yorker*) have sung his praises melodiously among themselves—indeed, he is a near-textbook case of a "writer's writer"—but he has been accorded little attention in the prominent literary journals, and even less in the halls of academe.

This is hardly surprising, for Maxwell is nobody's idea of an academic novelist. He has always been indifferent to literary trends, impervious to the influence of his more noted colleagues; implicit in his writings is a conviction that there is nothing new under the sun. His sentences don't cry out for explication: on the contrary, Maxwell has always written a luminously direct, clear, and matter-of-fact prose, never indulging in stylistic exhibitionism or willful obscurity. His primary aim in his work is a Flaubertian one: to evoke the texture of human experience, and to do so with precision, elegance, and sensitivity. A faithful recorder of the thousand and one passing moods, small embarrassments, and petty discomforts that flesh is heir to, he is never in too much of a hurry to do justice to phenomena that don't make it into most novels—for instance the

1 Maxwell's latest book is *The Outermost Dream: Essays and Reviews* (Knopf, 240 pages, $19.95). All of the other Maxwell books mentioned in this essay are available in paperback reprints from David R. Godine, with the following exceptions: *Bright Center of Heaven* (Harper & Brothers, 1934); *Stories* (with Jean Stafford, John Cheever, and Daniel Fuchs; Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956); and *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (available in Ballantine paperback).

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way that one can fall in love with a stranger on a train whom one doesn't speak to and will never see again. Maxwell is unafraid of sheer feeling.

In his novel *The Château* (1961), he describes a pair of American tourists in France as follows: "They saw (as if seeing were an art and the end that everything is working toward) a barn with a sign painted on it: *Rasurel*." To read Maxwell at any length is to find oneself deciding that seeing *is* an art, and Maxwell one of its unexampled masters. He is blessed with a rare sense of wonder: his books constantly remind us that life, love, friendship, youth, and a sense of beauty are mysterious gifts, things to marvel at. "Life," as one of his characters insists, "is something more than we believe it to be." Maxwell himself has commented: "So strange, life is. Why people do not go around in a continual state of surprise is beyond me." Yet he does not pretend to be able to penetrate life's mysteries in any lasting and conclusive way; as he observes in *The Château*, "When you explain a mystery, all you do is make room for another." He is acutely aware that man falls far short of omniscience; and he knows, too, that though we may sometimes think of ourselves as gods—as masters, that is, of the natural world—we are in reality a part of nature, subject to its laws and rhythms, its pleasures and perils, as helpless and vulnerable as all the other scurrying fauna.

Despite his depth of feeling, Maxwell is no sentimentalist: in fact, he is a good deal less of a romantic than his fellow Midwesterners Fitzgerald and Hemingway (both of whom were his elders by a decade or so). He remains more of a Midwesterner than they did, too: though he has written a novel about Americans in Europe, and a number of short stories about well-to-do New Yorkers, the emotional center of the bulk of his fiction has always been in the Midwest—specifically, in the World War One-era Illinois of his childhood and youth. Likewise, the guiding sensibility of his fiction has always been rather premodern. Maxwell employs irony sparingly, doesn't find *Angst* any more fascinating than he does affection, and values sensibleness, hard work, generosity, tenderheartedness, and family loyalty. He also respects, in their place, both wildness and tameness; though we are all nature's children (a circumstance reflected in the names of such boy characters as Thorn and Spud), and though it is natural for the young to revel innocently in this circumstance, we also need civilization and its rituals—particularly as we grow older and take on responsibilities to one another.

Most of Maxwell's fiction, furthermore, obviously contains a strong autobiographical strain. In large part, this can probably be attributed to the fact that, at the age of eight, Maxwell lost his mother in the influenza epidemic of 1918; the memory of this devastating and irrevocable loss reverberates through much of his fiction. Though one rarely has the impression, to be sure, that a given Maxwell novel or story consists of pure, unadulterated memory, one nearly always senses that many of its characters are based upon the author's family members or friends, and that its settings derive from places that have figured importantly in his life; certainly it is impossible not to notice the proliferation of sensitive, artistic boy-heroes who live in Lincoln or Chicago, Illinois. For all this, however, few writers seem so free of self-indulgence, egocentrism, and narcissism, so naturally empathic. It is as if, to Maxwell, memory is a moral and an aesthetic act, and literary creation a means, as it were, of improving upon the shortcomings of photography and capturing moments in time. (He complains in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, for example, that "love, even of the most ardent and soul-destroying kind, is never caught by the lens of the camera. One would almost think it didn't exist.") His sympathetic powers are prodigious: in setting innocence against experience, outsider against insider, brain against brawn—as he does in various novels—his purpose is not to exalt one type of person at the expense of another, but to examine the ways in which people of extremely different backgrounds get along

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with one another, or fail to. In his books, difficulties between people typically arise not from the malicious intentions of one or the other party, but rather from divergences in background, in cultural assumptions, and in ways of life. This is not to suggest that Maxwell has a Pollyanna-ish view of life, seeing innocence wherever he looks; on the contrary, he recognizes the blindness of most people to virtue, and the role of gossip as a community's means of compelling uniformity. Yet if, at its grimmest, Maxwell's fiction deplores forced uniformity as earnestly as it laments the barriers that separate people (and peoples) from one another, at its brightest it celebrates the genuine bonds that connect people—celebrates, that is, the ability of human beings to understand and care about and be kind to one another, in spite of (and, in some instances, because of) their differences.

A case in point is Maxwell's flawed but interesting first book, *Bright Center of Heaven* (1934). Set in and around Meadowland, a boardinghouse in the Wisconsin countryside, the novel gives a detailed account of a single day in the lives of the house's residents and guests. The proprietor is Susan West, a high-toned, good-hearted, but rather scatterbrained and debt-ridden widow who is described by one of her boarders as "very much alive—more so than any woman I've ever known." Living with Mrs. West are her two teenaged sons, Thorn and Whitey; among those also in residence, as the novel opens, are a painter, a pianist, and a pair of lovers named Paul and Nigel (a young lady). (This contemplative account of a country house populated by artists and intellectuals, and presided over by a benevolent matriarch, is vaguely reminiscent of *To the Lighthouse*.) Much of the day is spent in anticipation of the arrival of yet another boarder, Jefferson Carter, a well-educated black man who is a friend of Mrs. West's and whom no one else at the house has ever met. With some justice, Paul looks upon Mrs. West's invitation to Carter as a "sociological experiment"—for it is clear that at least one or two of the guests will not take kindly to his presence.

While we're waiting for Mr. Carter to arrive, Maxwell offers us glimpses into the minds of the other characters, several of whom experience, in isolation, a sense of grace. For instance, Josefa, the pianist, finds that a great piano piece is a "testimony, left by others, of something more than mind—of a moment of Grace which came upon them . . . . And what they remembered they wrote down in succession and rearranged and made orderly, so that for other people there was something almost like a moment of Grace, though not Grace itself." Yet all is not harmony here. Mrs. West's cook, Johanna, has a private torment: her mother is ill in Germany. "Day and night for seven months, while her body was in domestic bondage to the Wests, her mind had been with her mother, in the mountains of another continent, with a wide sea between." In a way, everyone at Meadowland occupies a separate world. When it begins to rain during a midday picnic, Maxwell observes that "the same rain fell on them all, yet to each one it was a different thing": Susan sings, Whitey leaps in pretended fear, Thorn strolls along serenely, Johanna clucks in protest, Paul walks absently, Nigel runs "like a deer." As the artist Cynthia says, in explaining why she paints not people but oranges, "People are much too complex . . . . Once you begin to look at them, you discover too much that is individual."

For the most part, Maxwell limns these singular characters and their solitary worlds with considerable delicacy and wit. But the book does occasionally feel forced, the natural setting rather stylized. And when the most foreign character of all, Jefferson Carter, appears on the scene, Maxwell's vision seriously falters. There are several problems with Carter. First, it seems unlikely that an intelligent black man who is very active as "a lecturer and teacher and as a leader of the Negro race" would accept an invitation to a place like Meadowland. Second, for a man who has moved among white bigots all his life, and who patently

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would not have gotten to where he is if he hadn't kept his cool time and again in the face of their unreasoning hostility, Carter seems much too easily enraged by the outspoken prejudices of his dinner-table partners at Mrs. West's. Finally, while the white folks at Meadowland come across as flesh-and-blood characters, Carter seems a bit too much of a period stereotype—an Educated Negro, proud and dignified and devoted to the betterment of his people, thoroughly unobjectionable because thoroughly unindividuated. Since Carter's appearance—and his abrupt nocturnal departure—are the novel's climactic events, these failings are especially damaging. Clearly, Maxwell's primary thematic concern here is with the communion and estrangement not of races but of individuals (of whatever color, and for whatever reason). Yet the emphasis on Carter's race distorts this theme, and steers the book into the territory of the Thirties social-problem novel—not necessarily a bad territory, but one whose language Maxwell simply doesn't speak.

Nonetheless, *Bright Center of Heaven* provides a useful introduction to the Maxwell oeuvre. The novel nicely communicates its author's high regard for love and compassion, his preoccupation with both the destructive and curative powers of time, his raw horror of death, his affection for nature and humanity, and his unwavering sense of the value of life. When the Wests' pet dog kills a beloved frog that has made its home in the goldfish pond, the point is made that the proliferation of seemingly identical frogs doesn't make any individual frog's life worth less; likewise, despite Cynthia's observation that similar patterns keep turning up on leaves and flowers ("as if the Lord lacked inventive powers and had to repeat himself frequently"), and despite a character's remark that people "repeat themselves just the way plants do," Maxwell emphasizes that humanity constitutes an infinite yet wondrously unified spectrum of tiny differences. Like Cynthia's painting, his first book aspires to be a "study in form," a study of the "relationship that exists throughout natural forms"—the natural forms in this instance, of course, being human individuals.

In Maxwell's next two novels, the canvas is considerably smaller—and the brushwork far more dexterous—than in *Bright Center of Heaven*. Or, to put it more precisely, the number of principal characters diminishes in these books while the time frame expands. Whereas *Bright Center of Heaven* explores the minds and hearts of a dozen or so people, mostly adults and mostly strangers to one another, over the space of one day, his second book closely examines the four members of a Midwestern family over a period of a few weeks, while his third focuses intently upon the intimate friendship of two teenaged boys, the choppy course of whose mutual enthrallment it follows through several years. It is plain that both of these novels derive, to a considerable extent, from the author's own emotion-packed childhood and youth; certainly both books feel a great deal more personal, and less programmatic, than their predecessor.

The earlier of these two books, *They Came Like Swallows* (1937), is a short novel about a single family—the Morisons of Logan, Illinois (a town which is about one hundred and fifty miles south of Maxwell's native Logan County)—and about the tragedy that befalls them in the final weeks of the year 1918. Instead of leaping every four or five pages from one character's point of view to another's, as in *Bright Center of Heaven*, Maxwell divides this novel into three sections, each of which confines itself to the perspective of a single member of the family. "Whose Angel Child" takes us inside the mind of the youngest Morison, the bright eight-year-old Peter, who is called Bunny and who is profoundly attached to his adoring (and pregnant) mother. Fifty-seven of the section's sixty pages are devoted to a painstaking evocation of a typical Sunday in the Morisons' home as experienced by Bunny; the section's final three pages, by contrast, offer an unsettlingly brief glimpse

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of the following morning, on which normality is forever shattered by an ironic combination of events: World War One finally ends (for this Monday happens to be the eleventh of November, 1918), and the devastating, much-discussed epidemic of so-called Spanish influenza finally touches the Morison family. Sections two ("Robert") and three ("Upon a Compass Point") continue the story of the Morisons' encounter with the disease—up to the inevitable, horrifying death in the family and its nightmarish aftermath—from the respective points of view of Bunny's thirteen-year-old brother, Robert, and the boys' distant and tormented father, James.

They Came Like Swallows is an impressive book, not least for Maxwell's expert use of foreshadowing and suspense, for his rendering of the gradually darkening mood of the Morison home, and for the way in which he captures the protagonists' feelings of love and loss without descending into bathos. Like James Agee in *A Death in the Family*, Maxwell proffers a number of false leads regarding who in the family is going to die—the point being that any of these people actually *could* die, that death itself is arbitrary, capricious. Foretokenings of mortality—falling leaves, a child's macabre song, a playmate's illness—abound from the opening pages. Every visitor comes to seem a threat, a possible source of contamination; even the ticking of the big clock in the hall takes on a certain ominousness. The book's most unforgettable image is the one alluded to in the title: a swallow flies into the sickroom—an event which, we have been told, is a legendary harbinger of death—and family members attempt to drive it out. Yet they cannot drive out death: eventually, the epidemic takes its victim, and the Morisons' happy home becomes a memory. Especially given the novel's tacit identification of the epidemic with the chaotic, ravaging modern world that was ushered in by the Great War, it would seem significant that Maxwell borrowed the title of this novel from a line in the poem "Coole Park, 1929" by William Butler Yeats; for Yeats's poem, it will be remembered, also commemorates a household—that of Lady Gregory—which represented pre-modern grace, and which, as a target of land-reform confiscation, was destined to perish at the hands of the modern age as surely as the Morison home.

Fastidious yet piercing, *They Came Like Swallows* ponders the ways in which people matter to each other, reminding us how strongly the unity of a family—or of any group of people who share each other's lives—can rely on the contribution of a single member. Here, as elsewhere in Maxwell's fiction, a family—precious, precarious, and alarmingly mutable—serves as the chief symbol of the fragile interdependence of human lives. Maxwell's use of father-and-son protagonists, moreover, provides him with an opportunity to demonstrate that many an adult is no less baffled than a child is by the thornier vicissitudes of life—and that, indeed, beneath the civilized surfaces there are fewer differences between adults and children than meet the eye. Most of all, Maxwell's second novel underlines how skilled Maxwell is with young characters. Unlike many writers of fiction, he seems never to have forgotten how a child's mind works, and the long sections he devotes to Bunny and Robert give us ample time to settle into the distinctive tones and rhythms of these boys' lives. To be sure, Maxwell's employment of three distinct centers of consciousness has its disadvantages: not only does the tripartite structure weaken the sense of focus but the fact is that in the latter part of the book we quite simply miss Bunny's perspective, which is more charming and affecting than that of his father. But this is a quibble about a book which should perhaps be counted among the minor classics of its time.

Maxwell's third—and, in many ways, his finest—novel, *The Folded Leaf* (1945), was published eight years after *They Came Like Swallows*, and takes place in the mid-1920s, from five to nine years after the action of *Swallows*. Once again we are in Illinois, and in the company of boys; indeed, the novel's

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teenaged protagonist, Lymie Peters, bears more than a passing resemblance to the eight-year-old Bunny. As the novel opens in October of 1923, Lymie is a slight, sensitive, and intelligent fifteen-year-old; his mother has been dead for several years, during which he and his father, an emotionally undemonstrative stationery salesman, have lived in cheap hotels and gloomy furnished apartments and taken their meals in diners. Spud Latham is the new boy in Lymie's grade at school. Strong and athletic, and as combative as Lymie is gentle, Spud sorely misses the comfortable Wisconsin home that he, his parents, and his older sister have left behind, and despises the dark little big-city house into which his newly glum father's business reversals have forced the family to move.

Different as they are from each other, Lymie and Spud seem to have at least two things in common: both are neglected by their fathers and alienated from most of their schoolmates. It is not altogether surprising, then, that the fragile, awkward boy (who has never had a friend before) and the athlete with a chip on his shoulder become best buddies. Enhancing Lymie's attraction to Spud, moreover, are his envy of Spud's masculine build and cocky attitude, and his discovery in the Lathams of a surrogate family (whose ready and wholehearted acceptance of him as one of their own brings him immense joy). As for Spud, Lymie seems to be the only boy in school who doesn't strike him as a threat; even more importantly, he enjoys being admired. But there is a simpler explanation for the boys' interest in each other. At a classmate's home, Lymie observes a beautiful Chinese lacquer screen; on one side of it are images of fierce armed warriors, and on the other side are white flowers. A professor explicates it for him: "The mutual attraction of gentleness and violence, don't you see, Mr. Peters? The brutal body and the calm philosophic mind."

The first three-eighths of the novel chart the gradual development of Lymie and Spud's friendship over the course of a high-school year. This process is marked by a couple of highly dramatic, intimate, and enigmatic events. First, the boys initially encounter each other—naked—during a water polo game in the school swimming pool; a panicky Lymie, refusing to let go of the ball, is pushed underwater by several classmates, and Spud saves him from drowning. Some weeks later Lymie returns the favor, after a fashion: following a scarifying initiation into a high-school boys' club, Spud discovers that his urine is green, and it is Lymie who explains to him that he's not dying but simply voiding some substance ingested during the hazing. It is in the wake of this bizarre incident that the boys begin to experience the intense mutual awareness that will characterize their friendship for years to come:

> The door of Room 211 stood open, and high-pitched voices were swarming out of it. Spud and Lymie walked in together and down separate aisles. In spite of the babel and the steady tramping outside in the corridor, each of them heard the other's footsteps; heard them as distinctly as if the sound were made by a man walking late at night in an empty street.

Before long, the rhythms of Lymie's and Spud's lives have fallen into step with one another. The last barrier to wholehearted devotion, on Lymie's part, collapses on a rainy afternoon in the Latham house when Spud tries to remove Lymie's wet clothes. Lymie surprises Spud—and himself—by putting up a struggle; and he fights every step of the way, "like a country defending itself against an invader," as Spud removes one item of clothing after another. Then, suddenly, Lymie stops struggling: "Something had burst inside him, something more important than any organ, and there was a flowing which was like blood. Though he kept on breathing and his heart after a while pounded less violently, there it was all the same, an underground river which went on and on and was bound to keep on like that for years probably, never stopping, never once running dry." This description of a neglected, motherless boy's initial resistance

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and ultimate acceptance of his love for another human being is brilliantly done: few writers could manage such an episode without stumbling headlong into sentimentality, or, on the other hand, without making the whole thing seem merely a carnal encounter.

That Lymie and Spud's friendship is a complex and not entirely salutary affair becomes increasingly clear during the latter part of the novel, which picks up Lymie at age nineteen (four years into his friendship with Spud) and follows him through a year at an unnamed Midwestern college where he is Spud's roommate, bedmate (of a platonic variety), and helpmate. Lymie's manner with the insensitive Spud—who has become a boxer and acquired a girlfriend named Sally—is thoroughly devoted, self-abnegating; his day-to-day life is bound to Spud's as surely as any wife's to her husband's. Yet his feelings for Spud, and Spud's for him—feelings which the boys seem never to have examined, and which they have certainly never mentioned to each other—contain elements of resentment, jealousy, even hatred. We are told, for instance, that during their struggle on the Lathams' floor, Lymie's expression "was almost but not quite hate"; a classmate at college informs Lymie that Spud "talks for an hour at a time about how much he hates you."

What is afflicting this friendship? Maxwell's answer, in four words: paternal neglect, Freudian projection. The narrator—who is far more discursive here than in Maxwell's previous novels—has some surprisingly stern things to say about a society whose fathers force their sons to find their own way through adolescence to manhood. Apropos of the initiation ceremony of the boys' high-school club, which takes place at a Chicago hotel, the narrator expatiates upon the rites of puberty: "The world is wonderfully large and capable of infinite repetition. At no time is it necessary to restrict the eye in search of truth to one particular scene. Torture is to be found in many places besides the Hotel Balmoral, and if it is the rites of puberty that you are interested in, you can watch the same thing (or better) in New Guinea or New South Wales." If Western puberty rites are less satisfactory than those of the New Guinea savages, it is because fathers are not involved: "The rites of puberty allow the father to punish the son, the son to murder his father, without actual harm to either. If Mr. Latham had been present and had taken part in the initiation, he might have been able to release Spud forever from the basis of all his hostilities." And Mr. Peters might have done the same for Lymie. But Western initiations don't work that way. "Now instead of being freed of his childhood, Lymie will have to go on smearing his face up with taffy-apples of one kind or another and being stopped by every plaster pig that he encounters, for years to come."

One may not agree with the narrator that the interests of youth are better served by primitive rites of puberty than by Western civilization's substitutes, but one cannot help feeling that Lymie and Spud's extraordinary mutual attachment and antipathy are indeed manifestations of, respectively, a lack of paternal attention and a deep-seated resentment thereof. In any event, Maxwell's interpretation of the boys' attachment to one another as the consequence of parental mismanagement does not gainsay his genuine regard for the attachment itself. For *The Folded Leaf* is ultimately a study not of neurosis but of love. The book is crowded with small, affecting, and utterly credible moments, all of them fondly observed; no reader can soon forget, for instance, Lymie's astonishment at Mrs. Latham's simple kindness to him, or his happiness at her pronouncement that he is a "member of the family." Whatever their genesis, the joy, comfort, and serenity that Lymie derives from his friendship with Spud are very real, and Maxwell does a magnificent job of bringing these feelings to life, and of making palpable their connection to the daily routines which Lymie cherishes so deeply. To read *The Folded Leaf*, indeed, is to see most other celebrated novels of

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adolescence as false, stylized, and riddled with cheap sentiment and nostalgia. Certainly this is one of the best American novels of its time.

Maxwell's fourth and fifth novels represent a moderate shifting of gears. In these books the boy protagonists of *They Came Like Swallows* and *The Folded Leaf* are replaced by adults; concision gives way to a surprising expansiveness; and the almost lapidary structure of the earlier books is supplanted by a markedly looser, freer sense of form. Indeed, the reader of *Time Will Darken It* and *The Château*, which are Maxwell's longest novels by far, may well feel at times that there is no form at all to either of them—and it is this impression which Maxwell plainly seeks to foster. For his principal aim here is to mimic, as closely as possible, the patterns and textures and rhythms of real life—to make both novels feel, line for line, like valid renderings of reality. To some extent, of course, this is his purpose throughout his fiction—and, for that matter, the purpose of most novelists—but it has special priority in these two books. Though admirers of *They Came Like Swallows* and *The Folded Leaf* may find *Time Will Darken It* and *The Château* somewhat flat, arbitrary, and overlong, it must be said that, judged in terms of their implicit literary aims, they are really quite successful. To read each of these novels is to feel that one is experiencing life on the level on which it is actually lived; it is to feel as if one is watching relationships develop at a natural pace. In this connection, a passage from *Time Will Darken It* seems relevant: "Most people, when they are describing a friend or telling a story, make the mistake of editing, of leaving things out. Fearing that their audience will grow restless, they rush ahead to the point, get there too soon, have to go back and explain, and in the end, the quality of experience is not conveyed." Maxwell might as well be making an observation not about inexpert conversationalists but about the failings of his fellow novelists. Conveying the quality of an experience: that is clearly the chief goal of *Time Will Darken It* and *The Château*, and if the action sometimes meanders, if one or two plot threads are left hanging, and if a few conversations drag on a bit longer than they should—well (one imagines Maxwell explaining), that's the way life is, and the enormous gain in fidelity makes the trade-off more than worthwhile.

This is not to suggest that either of these novels is lacking in artfulness. As Joseph Conrad knew, to make a reader hear, feel, and see reality before him is a far from simple task. Yet at their best both of these books have the ultimate effect of making other, more high-profile contemporary novelists seem out of touch with reality—distant from it, false to it, their proportions wrong, their characters crude approximations. As in *Bright Center of Heaven*, the canvases of both *Time Will Darken It* and *The Château* are good-sized; each features a married couple who occupy the center of a large and complicated network of relationships. While Maxwell's focus, as always, is on individuals and not groups, sectional identity plays a key role in one of the novels, as does national identity in the other; and both books begin with the arrival of summer sojourners in a part of the world they consider foreign.

The couple in *Time Will Darken It* (1948) are Austin and Martha King of Draperville, Illinois. Austin is a lawyer, honest and unobtrusive, a solid citizen who has "taken very good care that people shouldn't know anything about him"; Martha is loving and insecure, "a beautiful woman who [can't] believe in her own beauty or accept love without casting every conceivable doubt on it." During the summer of 1912, they are visited by a Mr. and Mrs. Potter of Mississippi and their courting-age children, the plain but upright Nora and the handsome but irresponsible Randolph. A number of events ensue, the most important being that Nora falls in love with Austin and decides to remain in Draperville, where she helps two local spinsters, Alice and Lucy Beach, to set up a kindergarten. Though Austin doesn't return her love or encourage it, the town's gossipmongers find him guilty of

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adultery, and his career is severely damaged; Nora, meanwhile, sustains some damage herself in a freak accident, and is obliged to return to Mississippi.

Such is the novel's principal story line. But there are numerous other things going on here as well. During his visit to Draperville, for instance, Potter talks several of Austin's friends into a bad investment which Austin feels obliged to make good on; Mary Caroline, a homely neighbor girl, develops a crush on Randolph; Rachel, the Kings' servant, has man problems and leaves town; Austin's aging friend Bud Ellis makes a play for Nora. If in *The Folded Leaf* a pair of fathers are too neglectful of their growing sons, here two mothers (Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Beach) are overly possessive of their grown daughters, effectively denying them lives of their own. At its best, *Time Will Darken It* seems a rich tapestry of poignant images (of Mary Caroline, for instance, waiting patiently on her front porch for a glimpse of Randolph), of memorable dialogue (forty-seven-year-old Lucy Beach wonders aloud "why people don't tell you when you're young that life is tiring"), and of blunt maxims: "The world is not a nice place." (Maxwell even has a maxim about maxims: "Most maxims are lies, or at any rate misleading. A rolling stone gathers moss. A stitch in time doesn't save nine.") Maxwell is not afraid to make forthright statements about fundamental things. Nor does he shrink from the temptation to promulgate outré conceits; this novel contains curtains, baskets, and bassinets that "talk": "*There will be other summer nights*, the sundial said, *nights almost like this, but this night won't ever come again. Take it while you have it.*"

One temptation that Maxwell does not succumb to, however, is the impulse to exploit the easy dramatic possibilities of his material. Though Austin and Martha have marital problems, they don't separate; though Austin's solemn, untrusting senior partner, Mr. Hobey, suggests that Austin's position is in jeopardy because of the gossip about him and Nora, Austin doesn't get fired; though Martha has an exceptionally difficult pregnancy, she doesn't die in childbirth. During her residency in Draperville, Nora lives next door to the Kings, and her constant proximity—of which Austin (as well as the reader) is acutely aware—causes one to suspect that eventually Austin will succumb to her blandishments; but he never does. Maxwell's conspicuous setting forth of all these options, and his equally conspicuous refusal to take advantage of them, seem part of a deliberate attempt to demonstrate that serious fiction doesn't require such drastic contingencies in order to be compelling. Does he prove his point? On the whole, yes. The novel does have its slow stretches, and an occasional feeling of directionlessness; but it nicely captures the milieu it has chosen to examine, and the character portraits have great veracity and charm. Indeed, the book resonates with nobility and life, with an ardent love for the innocent and irrecoverable past, and with a mature awareness that there are many different ways to seize the day.

The *carpe diem* theme (as well as the talking furniture) crops up too in *The Château*, which chronicles the visit of a youngish American couple, Harold and Barbara Rhodes, to France in 1948. Harold is exceedingly reminiscent of Lymie Peters: during his Midwestern childhood, we are told, "he would have liked to be somebody else—an athlete, broad-shouldered, blond, unworried, and popular." These days, he is a friendly, curious, and unworldly young man with a good enough job at an engraving firm. Barbara—who is often taken for Harold's sister—is beautiful, more perceptive than her husband, and somewhat more fluent in French. The Rhodeses have no children; if Spud serves as a sort of father substitute for Lymie, so the Rhodeses' French vacation is, in a strange way, a child substitute for them, and the ardor that they lavish on the country and its people is as breathless as that of parents for a newborn infant. As with Lymie's affection for Spud, however, Maxwell does not undervalue this ardor merely because he understands its mechanism. Nor, though many of their

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observations about France betray (by turns) naïveté, romanticism, and world-class insecurity, does he want us to regard Harold and Barbara as objects of ridicule.

The château of the novel's title is near Blois; it is during an extended stay there that the Rhodeses gather many of their lasting impressions of France. Like Susan West in *Bright Center of Heaven*, Mme. Viénot, the lady of the manor, is a high-born but impoverished widow whose home, now a boardinghouse, is occupied largely by intellectual types and non-paying relatives. The Rhodeses spend much of their time worrying—about their French, about making a *faux pas*, about whether the other guests like them—and undergoing the exhilarating, exhausting task of meeting lots and lots of new people. There are the usual blisses and disappointments: they are attracted to certain people but never grow close to them, begin to form friendships only to have them collapse inexplicably, and wind up on intimate terms with certain individuals—an unattached and rather dotty old lady, an amiable young waiter—whose counterparts back home they would never have the occasion or inclination to befriend. A reader conditioned by other kinds of novels keeps expecting dramatic things to happen: an affair between Barbara and Mme. Viénot's handsome Canadian boarder? A devastating revelation about the delightful but contrary young couple Eugène and Alix? But nothing remarkable occurs—or, rather, *everything* remarkable occurs; for *The Château* is a celebration of the remarkableness of the ordinary, the mystery in the everyday. One of the book's lessons is that to visit a foreign country is not necessarily to discover exotic things; it is to discover the ordinary in exotic garb—to experience small talk, for instance, in a foreign tongue (Maxwell incorporates numerous passages in Basic French)—and thereby to learn anew to appreciate the mysteries with which one lives day by day.

A word should be added about the narratorial question-and-answer sessions in *The Château*. Though Maxwell adheres mostly to conventional narrative form, he departs from it briefly, about sixty pages into the story, in order to allow an unnamed interlocutor to query the narrator about Harold and Barbara's childhoods, employment histories, and reasons for being in Europe; the narrator proceeds to shed what light he can on these subjects. This curious dialogue resumes in "Some Explanations," a forty-six-page section at the end of the book, wherein the interlocutor expresses impatience with *The Château*'s lack of closure. "Is that all?" the interlocutor demands at the section's outset. He wants answers to the questions that the novel has left hanging. The narrator challenges him:

> I don't know that any of these things very much matters. They are details. You don't enjoy drawing your own conclusions about them?
>
> *Yes, but then I like to know if the conclusions I have come to are the right ones.*
>
> How can they not be when everything that happens happens for so many different reasons?

The narrator proceeds to satisfy his interlocutor on some points, but not on others. Is the *reader* satisfied? Yes and no. The section is at once provocative and irksome—sardonic one moment, slack the next, its very existence a seeming betrayal of the book's spirit. It does, however, add up to a cogent commentary upon the fact that readers of fiction have been trained to expect artificially tidy endings; Maxwell's implicit argument is that a novel should not pretend to solve insoluble riddles, but should instead provide some testimony of human feeling which may touch the hearts of its readers and cushion them somewhat against life's unfathomable cruelties. So it is that in the closing paragraph of the novel Mme. Viénot picks up a book—the memoirs of a priest—and "puts what happened to him, his harsh but beautifully dedicated life, between her and all silences, all creaking noises, all failures, all searching for answers that cannot be found."

After *The Château*, Maxwell did not publish another novel for almost two

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decades. The three books that did appear during these years represent a variety of genres. *The Old Man at the Railroad Crossing and Other Tales* (1966) is an odd volume of twenty-nine short fables, five or six pages apiece, which typically begin with the words "once upon the time" and have such titles as "The Industrious Tailor" and "The Old Man Who Was Afraid of Falling" and "The Kingdom Where Straightforward, Logical Thinking Was Admired Over Every Other Kind"; the tales have serious points to make, but they seem designed to appeal to a decidedly minority taste for whimsy, and those who do not share this taste are very likely to find them overly cute and (when taken in bulk) monotonous. *Ancestors* (1971), a long, affectionate history of several generations of Maxwell's forebears, attests admirably to his continued fascination with his family and its past; yet though he chronicles his ancestors' lives with a wellnigh heroic diligence, he fails to evoke them as vividly as he does the characters in his best fiction, and the relentlessly compiled details are in the end rather tedious. Finally, *Over by the River* (1977) is a volume of finely tuned, precisely detailed short stories set in New York, New England, Illinois, and France; while there is some good work here—notably the title story, which charts an Upper East Side family's day-to-day anxieties—most of the stories are appreciably slicker than Maxwell's novels, and the characters and situations too often give the impression of having been pulled off the *New Yorker* rack. (In 1956, Maxwell had published several of these pieces in *Stories*, a joint collection with Jean Stafford, John Cheever, and Daniel Fuchs.)

Not until 1980 did Maxwell publish his sixth (and, to date, his last) novel, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. This intense, dreamlike little work—in which he returns to the Lincoln, Illinois, of his childhood to tell of a tenuous friendship terminated by an act of violence—represents a triumphant consummation of its author's art. Though in theme and setting and *dramatis personae* it is vintage Maxwell, the book marks a sharp shift in tone and scale from his previous novels, and especially from its immediate predecessors. One-third the length of *Time Will Darken It* and *The Château*, it lacks those novels' sense of immediacy, their generosity of color, their genial inclusiveness; in place of those attributes, Maxwell offers a black-and-white, Ingmar Bergman-like austerity, an enigmatic spareness. The book has the quality of a fable, a reverie; it is as if, over the decades of his life, Maxwell's memories of childhood had undergone the same process—of shaping, heightening, purging of ancillary detail—by which a culture turns its early history into myth. In this regard, the novel is a close relative of the stories in *The Old Man at the Railroad Crossing and Other Tales.*

So Long, See You Tomorrow is Maxwell's only novel to be written in the first person, and throughout the book the identity of the aged, mannerly, bleak-minded narrator—who agrees with Ortega y Gasset that life is "in itself and forever shipwreck"—seems ambiguous: is he supposed to be William Maxwell, or only a fictional approximation? As far as one can tell, his personal history jibes with Maxwell's: in the early 1920s, when the story is set, he was twelve years old, living in Lincoln with his insurance-salesman father (who represented authority, and therefore "could not also represent understanding") and a new stepmother; his real mother had died a few years earlier, an event after which "there were no more disasters. The worst that could happen had happened." The nearest thing the boy had to a friend was Cletus Smith, a farmer's son with whom he would walk on the scaffolding of the unfinished house that his father and new stepmother were having built. Every evening the boys would part casually, saying "So long" and "See you tomorrow"—until one day when Cletus's father killed a neighbor (and former best friend) who had stolen his wife, and then committed suicide. Cletus was never called to testify in the case, and promptly left town with his mother for parts unknown; when our narrator moved to Chicago sometime later, he was surprised to

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find his eyes meeting Cletus's in the school hallway.

Decades later, he still feels guilty about his failure to speak to Cletus on that occasion. Since he has no idea where Cletus is now, or even whether he is alive, "the one possibility of my making some connection with him seems to lie not in the present but in the past—in my trying to reconstruct the testimony that he was never called upon to give." So it is that the second half of the novel consists of an elaborate, meticulously worked-out imaginative reconstruction of the events in the lives of the Smiths and their friend which led up to the murder. While the narrator's recollections of his friendship are true, in other words—at least within the context of the book—his reconstruction is a "mixture of truth and fiction." Yet it has a kind of validity, he implies, because in inventing it he has drawn upon his longstanding familiarity with farm people and their lives. Besides, he observes, truth is a slippery thing in the best of cases: "The unsupported word of a witness who was not present except in imagination would not be acceptable in a court of law, but . . . the sworn testimony of the witness who was present is not trustworthy either."

Why does Maxwell choose to place his story of Cletus's family on such a slippery epistemological foundation? For one thing, the story's status as a question mark within a question mark enhances its mythic quality. For another, Maxwell's emphasis upon the fact that the story is a creation invites us to contemplate the boundary between memory and imagination—a boundary that Maxwell's novels have poignantly straddled time and again. Finally, the book is a means of communicating—at least in a metaphysical sense—with Cletus, whom our narrator has long since lost track of, and who may well have passed away decades ago. If imagination can be a form of sympathy, this novel represents a belated offering of consolation to Cletus, as well as an expression of compassion for all children who labor under the ingenuous delusion that there will always be a tomorrow, that time—which Maxwell memorably describes in *The Château* as "the relentless thieving that nobody pays any attention to"—will not someday make off with that which they hold most precious, and change their lives forever. The novel—which may well be Maxwell's best, aside from *The Folded Leaf*—brings to mind a remark from John Updike's recently published memoirs: "a writer's self-consciousness, for which he is much scorned, is really a mode of interestedness, that inevitably turns outward." It might be said that in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, Maxwell turns outward from the anguish of his own childhood to that of another, even more tormented individual—a virtual stranger whose life touched his, lightly and fleetingly, or who may indeed be entirely a product of his imagination. The ultimate point is that it does not matter whether Cletus ever really existed, or whether our narrator is actually Maxwell: *So Long* is archetypally true, the story of everyone who knows what it means to have to live with one's past.

In his introductory note to his newest book, *The Outermost Dream: Essays and Reviews*—a collection of non-fiction which reaches the bookstore shelves fifty-five years after the publication of his first novel—Maxwell states, by implication, his criterion for good fiction: it must have "the breath of life." There hardly seems a more appropriate phrase than this with which to describe the supreme virtue of Maxwell's novels. At a time when many respected American authors fixate passionlessly upon banal domestic details, or twist reality out of recognition in service to this or that non-literary purpose, or produce one enigmatic volume after another of words that are about nothing but themselves, one can only be grateful for a novelist whose particulars are thoughtfully and tellingly chosen, who never treats an idea as if it existed apart from human character, and who understands that the transcendent value of words in a work of fiction is their ability—in the hands of an artist—to capture things far beyond themselves: to mimic the rhythms and contours of life, to conjure up images and

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sensations preserved from oblivion. Maxwell understands, too, that such transfiguration doesn't come easily—that the truth, neither simple nor straightforward, "masquerades in inversions and paradoxes, is easier to get at in a lie than in an honest statement. If pursued, the truth withdraws, puts on one false face after another, and finally goes underground, where it can only be got at in the complex, agonizing absurdity of dreams." He is that splendid paradox: a commanding writer of conspicuous humility, a man of mature sensibility who has never ceased to apprehend this world as a cherished home, at once peril-ridden and rich with promise, in which we are all, in some sense, motherless children.

Admittedly, Maxwell's work has its limitations. He has never written a truly bad novel, but neither has he written a great one; he is undeniably one of our finest writers, but the aesthetic territory he has carved out for himself is nowhere near as grand as it might be: quiet, gentle, and unassuming, it is rather like the farm country of Illinois as compared to the Colorado mountains or the coast of Maine. To read his novels is to experience not a shock but a sort of delicate tingling of recognition; one comes away from his work not enervated by its power but aglow with its soft radiance. Doubtless this shortage of sound and fury is a major reason for Maxwell's decades-long neglect by critics and readers: a fine serious writer who doesn't touch the "big" subjects, who doesn't even care to climb into the ring with Melville and Joyce and James, is less likely to attract a wandering eye than one who does (even if the one who does gets knocked out in the first round). Broadly speaking, of course, it is unfortunate that one of our very best contemporary writers should have restricted himself in the way that Maxwell has. Yet one cannot quarrel with a writer's fundamental choices, especially when he has done as well by them as Maxwell has; there are, after all, few American novels of the past half-century that one would place ahead of *The Folded Leaf*, and few fictional works of the past decade that rank with *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. While it must be acknowledged, then, that William Maxwell's literary achievement is on a distinctly smaller scale than that of a Fitzgerald or a Hemingway, it must also be said that in his own realm he is, like them, a master.

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The "ecstasy" of Jean Baudrillard

by Richard Vine

It is easy to see that the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God is dead.
—Flannery O'Connor

Something in all men profoundly rejoices in seeing a car burn.
—Jean Baudrillard

Picture this droll scenario. Two hundred and thirty-nine young men are writing to their families, drinking with their buddies, shining shoes, talking to their girlfriends on the phone. They do not know that on October 23, 1983, a truck will slam through the gate of their Marine compound in Beirut, exploding and killing them gruesomely, without a fight. During this same period, partisans and bystanders are being shot daily in Ireland, El Salvador, Angola, Iran, and countless other bewildering locales. The United States and the Soviet Union, nurturing contrary interests in several of these regional abattoirs, confront each other with extravagant nuclear arsenals. And meanwhile, a certain sociology teacher at the University of Paris facility in Nanterre records a few rueful complaints: "what no longer exists is the adversity of adversaries, the reality of antagonistic causes, the ideological seriousness of war" and "entry into the atomic club, so amusingly named, very rapidly removes . . . any inclination towards violent intervention." Within pages, warming to his conviction that deterrence, safety regulations, and even ecological precautions are merely symptoms of an insidious oppression, he declares:

> Paradox: all bombs are clean—their only pollution is the system of control and security they radiate *when they are not detonated.*

These humane sentiments are soon translated into English and published with the aid of Columbia University. So venerated is the author at such elite American colleges that his theories are often discussed in graduate seminars, his works sought out for anthologization and study, his signature concepts—"hyperreality," "implosion," "the orders of simulacra," etc.—taken up in stylish intellectual journals. The gist of his thinking—that "there is no reality . . . other than that directly produced by the system as its ideal reference"—quickly captivates a number of young critics, who apply it to the self-referential world of postmodernist art. Deeply enchanted (or, in their own terms, "seduced"), they proselytize with such fury that many artists feel compelled to adopt their queer lingo and even to produce "simulationist" works in accord with their master's singular vision.

In 1987, on a triumphal lecture tour sponsored by the Whitney Museum,

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Columbia University, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, this self-described "metaphysician" and "moralist" enthralls large audiences of contemporary art devotees, who reportedly regard his books as divine writ. (Divine despite the writer's sincere—and accurate—protestation that he cannot explain current art practices linked to his name, despite a nearly complete lack of professionally credible aesthetic or art historical analysis in his work, and despite his published contention that "all of art since the Renaissance has been rot" and, in any case, "art is dead.") Ultimately, within five years of the American appearance of the "clean bombs" statement, Stanford University honors the theorist with publication of the twenty-year survey *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*.[1]

All of which occasions here a modest critical query: how did the unlikely Jean Baudrillard achieve such an exalted intellectual status? We have glimpsed part of the answer already. In a world of rampant academic celebrity (as opposed to earned fame), there is no cachet equal to that of the mysterious French intellectual. Whatever else one may say of Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Bataille, Lévi-Strauss, and now Baudrillard, they have certainly perfected the oracular wiles necessary to win abject American admirers. But for a fuller understanding of the Baudrillard phenomenon we must turn to his writing—as painful as that prospect may be. Only there can we discover the peculiar attraction of Jean Baudrillard's nihilistic romance.

Born in Reims, France, in 1929, Jean Baudrillard spent two decades, 1966 through 1987, teaching at the satellite university in Nanterre, site of the student uprising that precipitated the May 1968 disruptions in Paris and beyond. Since that epochal spring, he has produced a score of (mostly short) books dealing in a quasi-structuralist, quasi-semiotic manner with the impact of the mass media on economic and social commerce. In this body of work, Baudrillard's thinking has passed through three phases—actually shifts of strategy, tenor, and emphasis rather than content—comprising an hysterical escalation from the post-Marxist (1968-71), to the socio-linguistic (1972-77), to the techno-prophetic. Even limiting our examples to the principal titles available in English (since our topic is Baudrillard's sway over certain American intellects), we can witness the author beginning with qualified statements and reasonable—sometimes almost testable—theoretic correctives, passing quickly to pure speculative assertion, and ending with sci-fi prophecy of a sort intended to induce the very effects it predicts.

The two books of Baudrillard's post-Marxist phase, *The System of Objects* and *Consumer Society*—published in France in 1968 and 1970—examine the psychological imperatives of consumption in an advanced capitalistic economy. The first argues that meaning, not use, is primarily transferred through consumer objects and that the individual in effect buys a group identity and a metaphysical order with each over-determined purchase. The second contends that the individual—to the extent that he matters at all—merely fulfills the needs of the productive system under the *illusion* that he is servicing his private wants.

Baudrillard's impatience with Marx (who, after all, foolishly believed that need and scarcity were genuine) bloomed into explicit dissociation in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972) and *The Mirror of Production* (1973). Here Baudrillard announces not only that the sign prevails over social and economic activity, but that—in an improvement over Saussure—all alleged connections between referent (the real thing), signified (the concept of the real thing), and signifier (the marker for the concept of the real thing) have been definitively ruptured, if indeed they ever obtained. In this schema, signifiers "implode" to interrelate arbitrarily, in and of themselves, with no necessary

1 *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster; Stanford University Press, 230 pages, $37.50.

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correspondence to anything beyond their own chaotic but sovereign permutations. Of these we are observers at best, hypnotized slaves at worst.

If all of this sounds a bit like a Japanese monster movie entitled "Television: Master of the Universe," it should. From this point onward—through *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), *The Beaubourg Effect* (1977), *Forget Foucault* (1977), *On Seduction* (1979), *Simulations* (1981), *Fatal Strategies* (1983), *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1987), and *The Evil Demon of Images* (1987)—Baudrillard's argument, though subject to a dizzying array of variations, remains essentially constant. Television, advertising, and cybernetic technology are making the world safe for solipsism. "Fatal"—i.e., inconsequential—events arise and die in "ecstasy" (pure, empty, self-parodying form) without changing the exploitive equilibrium in which we are held, except to make us helplessly aware of our state through their "catastrophes." We are "seduced" by the charm of appearances, only to realize that there is nothing beyond appearances and that our own best maneuver is to practice surface manipulation ourselves, to seduce in turn some portion of the system by becoming so much like it, so perfect a clone, that it is forced to change or to reveal some new facet in order to maintain its authority over us. Of this strategy, no better example could be cited than Baudrillard's recent *America* (1986), in which the United States is treated not, in the manner of Tocqueville, as a noble and thrilling (though necessarily imperfect) experiment in democratic rule but as an hallucinatory spectacle whose greatest virtue is its glorification of trash: "The latest fast-food outlet, the most banal suburb, the blandest of giant American cars or the most insignificant cartoon-strip majorette is more at the center of the world than any of the cultural manifestations of old Europe."

Even this compressed survey makes Baudrillard sound much more systematic than he actually is. In fact, his thought does not develop at all. He is simply an aphorist who seized upon half a dozen borrowed concepts twenty-odd years ago and has rung changes on them ever since. Thus it is both frustrating and deceptive to seek progressive modulations between one text and another. They are all basically one book, and any fifty consecutive pages of Baudrillard are essentially the *whole* of Baudrillard. We are confronting a trendier version of Salman Rushdie's "the Untime of the Imam"—a fixed mentality which expressly repudiates dialectic and nurtures a cluster of preconceptions variously stirred at various moments but completely innocent of a vital dynamism.[2]

A lack of organic growth does not, however, preclude a myriad of jazzy effects. Baudrillard is determined to dazzle his way out of the professorial ghetto. His longing, though not exactly that of the moth for the star, unceasingly draws him into ever more florid formulations. Thus his critique of society only *begins* with the academic orthodoxy of our day:

> In order to function, capitalism needs to dominate nature, to domesticate sexuality, to rationalize language as a means of communication, to relegate ethnic groups, women, children and youth to genocide, ethnocide and racial discrimination. [3]

True, this litany contains, properly speaking,

2 Many of Baudrillard's books are substantially translated in his *Selected Writings*, including *The System of Objects*, *Consumer Society*, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, *On Seduction*, and *Fatal Strategies*. Semiotext(e), in New York, has published *Simulations* (1983), *Forget Foucault* (1987), and *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1988). Telos Press, in St. Louis, has published *The Mirror of Production* (1975) and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981). Verso, a London-based publisher, has just brought out the U.S. edition of *America* (1988). *The Beaubourg Effect* appeared in the Spring 1982 edition of the quarterly journal *October*.

3 *The Mirror of Production*, translated by Mark Poster; Telos Press, 1975, page 138.

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no ideas at all, only unexamined articles of faith. But no matter. This is a credo; these are the things one must *say first* in order to gain a hearing among our vanguard culturati. Students and young artists tend to find such "truths" self-evident, even comforting, since they comprise the lore most consistently heard from their "deepest" teachers and intellectually raciest friends. Real titillation begins only when the writer promises to go farther, to share forbidden pleasures even more lurid than these refurbished Marxist clichés.

We now live, Baudrillard claims, in a culture of the hyperreal. Our lives are shaped, indeed constituted, by symbols functioning without reference to tangible objects, individual identities, or biological needs, all of which have in every important sense ceased to exist. Only signifiers *are* in this essentially dematerialized universe. Mere simulacra—the distant imitations of, or pure signs for, a lost and often already phony reality (the "country breakfast" at a shopping mall, the off-the-shoulder blouses worn by every waitress in a franchised "Mexican" restaurant)—combine and recombine in an apparent "free play." Yet even the interactions of simulacra are dictated by an irresistible DNA-like social "code" that fosters "consummativity," the perpetual motion of a humanly pointless but systemically self-sustaining capitalism.

The recurrent metaphor here is Disneyland. Everything in this magic kingdom conspires to enrapture the unquestioning through the deployment of more-real-than-real simulations. Such a world, such a fantasyland, beguiles us while exercising a surreptitious repression. To be sure, it frees us from the tiresome myths of individuality, originality, and authenticity. "All the great humanist criteria of value," Baudrillard exults, "all the values of a civilization of moral, aesthetic, and practical judgment, vanish in our system of images and signs." But it also mires us in a homogeneous stasis controlled by and for the phantasm itself. The greater, more mysterious, more impetuous portion of our being, our non-pragmatic "ambivalence," goes unacknowledged and untapped. Ontologically, we count for nothing. The system, by means of its all-powerful code—expressed especially through advertising, television, and the news media—steadily generates the arbitrary and controlling "models" from which all that we experience and do is derived; we are defined and coerced by endless, falsely "unique" replications à la the relentless serial imagery of Andy Warhol.

Against such pervasive tyranny, Baudrillard declares, active resistance and the old hope of political revolution are worse than futile. Any marshaling of forces only perpetuates the sick paradigm: labor disproportionately expended for trifles, pure selfhood sacrificed to the cruel lie of future material salvation, communal play perverted into grim productivist effort. Hope is how capitalism binds us to the wheel, and Marx was wrong to think that its energies could be turned against exploitive functionalism. The socialist utopia, at its best, still requires work and discipline in exchange for its rewards.

One cannot overcome such a system: one can only refuse its blandishments and desist—desire nothing, cease production, seek no rewards and steadfastly refuse them when offered, become a postmodern stoic. Only then can one possibly return to the primal reciprocity—the "reversibility" and "responsibility"—of true symbolic interaction. Not the univocal, unidirectional "discourse" of media to audience, of government to citizen, of manager to employee, of advertiser to hungering psyche; but the direct, immediate, whole person to whole person give-and-take of primitive gift exchange, of the May '68 message walls, of pure conversation, of sex. Only such a transformation is able to "rescue us from the demands of rationality and to plunge us once more into absolute childhood."

There you have it, the whole of Baudrillard's seductive philosophy and the common weakness at which it aims: absolute

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childhood—a craven exemption from thinking, responsibility, and physical effort.

Who, then, takes Baudrillard seriously? Who most needs and wants to believe that the world actually operates in this fairy-tale fashion? The short answer is, of course, would-be children. More precisely, due to the dismal state of American liberal-arts education and to the concurrent bearishness of our visual arts market, those most vulnerable tend to be practicing artists under the age of thirty-five and young semi-academic critics on the make. Who could be more susceptible to the notion that, though they lack regular political power (being unwilling to engage in anything so philistine as popular electioneering and governance), they can nevertheless—through their signs and images alone—literally control the world? Never mind that such an idea is the classic rationale of the propagandist and that it has repeatedly been proved wrong by the recalcitrance of the "infinitely malleable" proles. For the voluntarily disenfranchised it is enough that Baudrillard describes—indeed celebrates—culture as a trading pit.

Those for whom signification is all and facture is nothing have made Baudrillard the fulfillment of his own prophecy. He has become an aesthetic commodity, one whose sign value bears no relationship to its alleged referent. "Baudrillard" no longer signifies a man or a body of work but a speech-act of tribal identification on the part of the speaker. It translates as: "I know what's happening on the art scene today. I have read—or at least heard about—hip deconstructionist theory and am eager to explain the former in terms of the latter (since, God knows, it doesn't make much sense to me otherwise). I know that trashing the system while living off its surplus the way Andy did is extremely cool." Certainly the Baudrillard corpus could itself serve as a veritable handbook on how to be an au courant intellectual. In it, all the major components fall dutifully into place. Indeed, thanks to Baudrillard, we can now spell out the seven commandments of contemporary social analysis.

1. Dissociate yourself from conventional life, capitalism, and the vulgar bourgeoisie—preferably by discovering in the unlikeliest places half-hidden machinations of repressive control.

Eager to be ever more *maudit* than thou, Baudrillard manages to surpass the imaginative fecundity of even the magisterial Foucault. First he weighs in with the now familiar claim that the definition of madness is but a ploy, that "every 'psychological dysfunction' *vis-à-vis* 'normality' (which is only the law of the capitalist milieu) is open to a *political* reading." He then proceeds, via a social interpretation of physical disease, to caution us against the pathological dangers of bourgeois hygiene. Conveniently, no mention is made of what science and attendant public health measures have accomplished against cholera, typhoid, smallpox, diphtheria, yellow fever, malaria, influenza, polio, leprosy, syphilis, etc. Instead, Baudrillard's argument, such as it is, resembles a bizarre crossbreeding of Christian Science with those lunatic 1950s Communist-conspiracy tirades against the fluoridation of city water supplies:

> The artificial purification of all milieus, atmospheres, and environments will supplant the failing internal immune systems. If these systems are breaking down it is because an irreversible tendency called progress pushes the human body and spirit into relinquishing its systems of defense and self-determination, only to replace them with technical artifacts. Divested of his defenses, man becomes eminently vulnerable to science. Divested of his phantasies, he becomes eminently vulnerable to psychology. Freed of his germs, he becomes eminently vulnerable to medicine.
>
> It would not be too far-fetched to say that the extermination of mankind begins with the extermination of germs.[4]

In short, medical progress is a plot—like

4 *The Ecstasy of Communication*, translated by Bernard and Caroline Schutze; Semiotext(e), 1988, pages 37-38.

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other bourgeois inventions, it's just another way of stifling naturalism and exerting control.

2. Purport to extend and correct the prevailing vanguard position. (Add ten points if you can do so through a "reflexive" argument that turns key doctrinal precepts back upon themselves.)

A major preoccupation of radical thinkers, from the founding of the Frankfurt School onward, has been the search for an alchemic formula that would somehow rid critical theory of such real-life Marxist impurities as chronic low productivity, avant-garde condescension toward "the masses," brute censorship, and, most embarrassing of all, that nettlesome Gulag. Baudrillard's solution is the magic of "transparency," which renders all such difficulties instantly unreal. Had Marx only had the benefit of modern semiotics, he would have realized that commodification explains not simply one element of the capitalist system but the system in toto, along with its very presuppositions. There is no biological essence of man, according to Baudrillard, hence no constant and irreducible requirement for food, shelter, and safety: "the 'vital anthropological minimum' doesn't exist." It is an illusion conjured up after the fact to justify and perpetuate the productivist enterprise: "there are only needs because the system needs them." Everything essential to humankind transpires symbolically, as is evident when Baudrillard asks, rhetorically, "is loss of status—or social nonexistence—less upsetting than hunger?"

The monstrosity of such a conception in light of, say, the recent famine in Ethiopia is best contemplated in purely humorous terms. Imagine, then, Monsieur Baudrillard in a restaurant. He peruses the menu fastidiously, selecting at last, with the waiter's recommendation, medaillons of veal accompanied by lightly buttered haricots verts, followed by a simple green salad, fruit and mixed cheeses, espresso, and a sliver of apricot tart—complemented by a delicate Chablis and, to finish, a noble but little known Armagnac. Then, without a quiver, and without so much as having *seen* any food, Baudrillard languidly calls for his check, says a gracious farewell to the maître d'hotel, and departs, having "consumed" the signs of a satisfying repast and fulfilled all the essential requirements of symbolic exchange.

3. Disdain quantitative measures and hard evidence. Spin elaborate theories out of a few anecdotes.

Baudrillard cannot afford to concede the validity of empirical standards of proof, for to do so would invite a great many unsettling questions. Exactly how, for example, is my grandmother's need to sleep *caused* by the manufacture of beds? Does her sleepiness increase with a rising rate of box spring production? Anyone can see that this kind of thinking might lead directly to science, which Baudrillard considers merely "a system of defense and imposed ignorance." For him, positivism, that hereditary curse of the Enlightenment, sets up criteria which, in their alleged objectivity, create a false "reality" by excluding whatever does not conform to a limiting, conventionalizing language: "the object of a (given) science is only the effect of its discourse."

Now you and I might take it for granted that science is nothing more or less than a way of talking about the world—the entire point being that this particular way of talking (in the second law of thermodynamics, for example) more accurately and consistently approximates the way things actually happen in the cosmos than do the winsome speculations of a three-year-old, of an Eskimo shaman, or, for that matter, of the Archbishop of Canterbury. But to Baudrillard this circumspection is precisely what invalidates science. If empiricism cannot give him everything, and at once, it is worse than useless: it is an impediment.

Perhaps this anti-positivism accounts for the proliferation of flat-footed errors throughout Baudrillard's oeuvre. The howlers include a belief that in an art auction "one cannot participate without being present," that "in the United States couples are encouraged to exchange wedding rings

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every year," that a credit card "frees us from checks, cash, and even from financial difficulties at the end of the month." Perhaps, too, it is why slipshod or cavalier are probably the kindest words that can be applied to Baudrillard's purported scholarship. Here, even his proponents express reservations, as in the anonymous "Notes on the Translation" prefacing *Selected Writings*: "Baudrillard rarely provides full citations in his own notes . . . . At other times [his] quotations have not been located anywhere in the text he cites" (p. viii).

4. Find inventive new applications for some standard postulates from today's master disciplines, anthropology and structural linguistics.

Baudrillard does not think about the world; he thinks about what current hit-parade intellectuals have thought about the world. And like the Pop serialists he occasionally mentions, he appropriates most readily from the tabloid celebrities, the academic equivalents of Liz and Marilyn, Jackie and Troy. Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Bataille, McLuhan—simply to evoke their names is to account for four-fifths of Baudrillard's research, the rest apparently consisting of long, selfless hours in front of a television set.

Such a procedure almost understandably gives rise to a vision of society as an outsized suburban high school, where all are forced, willy-nilly, to consume and all are judged by the sophistication of their material dialect. ("Which designer label do you wear?" having become, apparently, the prevailing version of "What's your sign?") Baudrillard's sense of history is, as we might expect, woefully inadequate. Thus he can, with complete aplomb, drop a remark like "since time immemorial, from Marx to Marcuse," or, without the slightest verification, adopt the now politically de rigueur position that savages once lived a physically, socially, and psychologically idyllic life to which only a liberation theology of the sign can ever restore us: "there is properly neither Necessity nor Scarcity nor Repression nor the Unconscious in the primitive order, whose entire symbolic strategy aims at exorcising the apparition of Law." Were modernist Britain's sternly provocative philosopher-poet T. E. Hulme among us today, he would surely observe that this is nothing but spilt Romanticism—of a sort that would probably bring a blush to Lévi-Strauss's own anthropological hero, the sainted Rousseau.

5. Systematically invert—or "transvalue"—all major tenets comprising the dominant doctrine of the previous generation. (If you are writing in France after 1968, subvert existentialism.)

They all want to kill Sartre. Kill him and step into his exalted, world-historical place. Baudrillard's oedipal blood lust is so strong that his entire theory is structured in reaction to the great father's ghost. Thus "existence precedes essence" becomes "the precession [*sic*] of simulacra"; "authenticity" becomes "the individual is non-existent"; "good faith" becomes "*truth does not exist*"; "man is freedom" becomes "the hegemony of the code"; choice, responsibility, and anguish become "ambivalence" and "free play"; "man is nothing else than his plan" becomes "there are no longer any projects"; "to choose. . . is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose" becomes "value is totalitarian." Et cetera.

6. Sensationalize your language. When in doubt, be murky. When stating the ludicrous, be melodramatic.

Aristotle talks like this: "What is the highest of all practical goods? Well, so far as the name goes there is pretty general agreement. 'It is happiness,' say both ordinary and cultured people; and they identify happiness with living well or doing well." Jesus talks like this: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." Freud talks like this: "Every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved." Baudrillard, by contrast, talks like this: "Identity is untenable: it is death, since it fails to inscribe

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its own death. Such is the case with closed, or metastable, or functional, or cybernetic systems, which are all eventually waylaid by laughter, instantaneous subversion (and not by a long dialectical labor), because all the inertia of these systems works against them."

Shall we conclude from this that Jean Baudrillard has a more complex mind than Aristotle, Jesus, or Freud? An alternative—and more plausible—explanation is that Baudrillard is steeped in the politically useful aesthetics of gibberish. His obfuscation is a matter of taste, of training, and of expediency.

In the contemporary culture wars, an abstruse style is the surest hallmark of a degenerate mind—an intellect ultimately governed by some motive other than truth. A prolix, ideologically impacted poetics *would* quite naturally oppose a classic tradition that has long honored dispassionate reason expressed with conciseness, precision, and memorable grace. Bad writing of the right sort—i.e., employing the "right" vocabulary toward the "right" political ends—has therefore become simultaneously a mark of membership and a weapon. This charged obscurity, when it is not the result of sheer incompetence, derives from a will to convert or to subjugate. It creates a false aura of profundity and at the same time enables the author to elude full responsibility. Masterfully, it combines a) a faulty syllogism with b) the coward's defense of a reasonable doubt, to wit:

> a) All profound works are difficult. (False major premise)
>
> This work is difficult. (Undistributed middle)
>
> Therefore, this work is profound. (Invalid conclusion)
>
> b) If we don't know for sure what a man said, we can't hang him for it.

Pharisaical writers count heavily upon our desire for psychic economy. If a reader must invest great effort to trick out the author's meaning, he will—particularly if he is academically insecure—be predisposed to accept it, rather than admit the utter waste of some portion of his intellectual energy and ever-diminishing life. Yet even this is a relatively healthy response. For there is often something infinitely crueler at work in truly execrable prose—a verbal sadism, a calculated terrorism of the word.

Baudrillard proceeds not by logic and evidence, but by a prophetic insistence appropriate to his role as the Kahlil Gibran of post-industrial France. Such writing imposes upon the reader rituals entirely of the author's devising, "purification" ceremonies addressed to the gullibility and self-loathing of the intellectually young. Normalcy, expressed in the consensual meaning of words and in the practice of language as a communicative (and hence communal) act, is derogated as naïve. The reader is cut out and cut off, immured like Justine/Juliette in a dark world of totalitarian rule where political "discipline" is applied to—and eventually welcomed by—those who are not as smart as they should be, nor as "good."

The special irony is that here we are dealing with an author who is himself obsessed with intimations of repression and control on every side. Those who most dread manipulation, it would seem, are those who know what *they* would do, given the chance. "*The discourse of truth is quite simply impossible,*" Baudrillard tells us. There is no "truth," no "reality" for language to convey; but there is, apparently, much for it to invent, and to inflict.

7. Never face a problem when you can define a new problematic. Offer your disciples deliverance "beyond good and evil," once they agree to be ideologically devout.

Clearly, we cannot decide what is right until we know what is true. But by setting up a mode of inquiry that precludes true and false judgments, Baudrillard makes moral choice and action unthinkable.

The gimmick-mongers of contemporary French thought are guilty of many logical

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and factual errors, but these are as nothing compared to their fundamental moral dereliction. For their infatuation with the indeterminacy of texts, the decentralization (and denaturing) of the authorial subject, the provisional quality of every explication, etc., yields a Vichy interpretation of literature—wishfully proposing a world in which no particular individual is responsible for any particular act, in which the capitalist *system* ruins lives day and night, while no upstanding leftist intellectual, whatever his views, could possibly be accused of complicity in the slaughters of the Khmer Rouge or the admissions policies of Soviet psychiatric hospitals. For twenty years now we have suffered the ascendancy of the congenitally evasive. They have taught us their fear of social virility, their horror of *virtù*.

What is it Baudrillard so ardently wants? Something simple and impossible—a revision of the basic terms of existence, "a revolution that aims at the totality of life and social relations." This philosophic pathology weaves its web between the myth of the Golden Past (primitivism) and the myth of the Utopian Future (unfettered symbolic exchange, ambivalence, worldwide youth liberation). "Take your desires for reality," Baudrillard quotes approvingly from the rhetoric of May 1968. Thus he condones the commission of *any* act, so long as it conduces to a privately defined state of Grace.

This overview cannot, in good conscience, be concluded without an apology. Baudrillard's most thorough, most sensitive readers will know that many important points have been passed over in silence, and that the whole of his work has been treated with indefensible kindness. What excuse can there be, the informed may indignantly ask, for such tactfulness toward a man who writes that "atomic war, like that of Troy, will not take place" because—as he explained to an Australian audience in 1984—we have already consumed its images on TV? (Perhaps someone should remind Baudrillard that, in historical fact, not only one but many wars were fought at Troy.) Is gentlemanly deference the proper response to a man who can speak of "the inconsequential violence that reigns throughout the world"—"inconsequential" because it merely tears bodies open without altering, to his satisfaction, "a system of planetary control"? Genteel diplomacy, perhaps, is unsuited to a man who, in a rapture over the telepathic and telemetric precociousness of the disabled, laments that the rest of us are "condemned by our lack of disabilities to conventional forms of work," and holds that the fortunate afflicted "can become wonderful instruments precisely because of their handicap. They may precede us on the path towards mutation and dehumanization."

Perhaps Nanterre is a world fundamentally different from the one the rest of us inhabit—i.e., the world where real beggars cadge real food on real New York subway cars. We are justified in suspecting, however, that the primary difference lies in the perceiver. Baudrillard, like every professional intellectual, is a creature of privilege. He has not had to sacrifice the most alert hours of his most active years to labor or commerce, to the sheer business of earning a living. He is not subjugated to the common life, commuting to office or factory and forced to do his human thinking on the fly. He is, rather, a prime beneficiary of the system he claims (perhaps ingenuously) to detest—one who enjoys luxuries of time and mental cultivation unmatched in all of history, except among the aristocratic and ecclesiastic estates. Baudrillard was paid by the nation of France—which is to say, largely through the taxes of working women and men—to spend his days and nights reading, thinking, writing, and talking to students and professional peers. Such dissipation may have been his undoing, and ours, to judge from the attitude he developed toward his fellow citizens:

> For a long time, I was very "cool" about producing theories . . . . I didn't think it had very much to do with anything. It was a kind of game. I could write about death without it

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> having any influence whatsoever on my life. When someone asked me, "What can we do with this? What are you really analyzing?" I took it very lightly, with great calm . . . . I maintained a position of distrust and rejection. That's the only "radicalness" I can claim. It might have something to do with my old pataphysical training: I don't want culture; I spit on it.[5]

And there, in contempt for everyday people leading everyday lives, the simulationist's smug autocracy begins.

Clearly, Baudrillard has disqualified himself from serious intellectual regard. Yet no small number of commentators insist upon dragging him back before our eyes with each new art season, with each new book, like so many proud kittens with a moribund mouse. And why? Simply because his dream is entrancing. Simply because he is voguish, talking of television, amusement parks, and "fatal strategies" rather than such retardataire issues as justice and meaning.

Certain of these supporters believe that they have a moral out, an "alibi," to use the Baudrillardian term. They are critics of art, which they consider an amoral endeavor—as though any activity which affects the mental condition of a democratic public could be void of ethical import. Granted, at times it does seem that an invisible wall surrounds SoHo, isolating a hybrid species within. It is bad enough when Baudrillard's abettors remain in these confines, inflicting harm on the entire tradition of pictorial meaning and artistic integrity. But it is infinitely worse when they presume to make pronouncements on global arms policies, general economics, and the "illusory" survival needs of mankind. Once aesthetes and dreamy professors begin to act as though their minor segment of the luxury trade were a model for the whole of productive life, they have left the preserve. They are fair game.

It is time for Baudrillard and his American apologists to stop making themselves ridiculous, time for them to stop luring the impressionable into a fun house that we who have lived to re-emerge know to be a chamber of horrors. Their vaunted infantilism—based on the fatuous notion that man uncontaminated by law and civilization is a creature of sweet temperament, a generous if occasionally mischievous flower child—would be quaintly laughable were it not so dangerous.

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5 *Forget Foucault*, translated by Phil Beitchman, Lee Hildreth, and Mark Polizzotti; Semiotext(e), 1987, page 81.

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Poems *by Peter Sacks, Maria Flook, Joe Bolton & Donald Justice*

As birds reviving from the cold will sing.

As birds reviving from the cold will sing
and move unsure of all but their delight,
so let my soul have its unwintering.

The breeze that sets the myrtle shimmering
until each leaf is given to the light,
as birds reviving from the cold will sing,

moves past all memory of grief to bring
such joy as only heaven limits in the height
where let my soul have its unwintering.

Why then such fear of the late frost no wing
survives, so short the breath to name outright,
as birds reviving from the cold will sing,

hope's substance and the argument of things
ascending by that law, unseen yet bright,
which turns the soul to its unwintering?

Too soon. I must outwait this natural spring
to pray beyond the season's passing flight,
as birds reviving from the cold will sing,
Now let my soul have its unwintering.

—*Peter Sacks*

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The lake

There's something false to this—
it's all surface, a shard of sky,
and below that, one imagines
a wild unconscious slime.
Lovers come at twilight, in neutrality,
couples who hang their heads
as if forced into arrangements
with their own reflections.
Birds shift down, dipping,
but only their shadows are cleansed.
They are hunting bluebottles
and other transparencies;
love could not inspire
such endless activity.
I stand on the bank, its ragged
moss like a velveteen collar
torn at the shoulder.
Looking across, I see the other half,
the other so much like this place
and my place in it.
The scalloped algae parts
and there we are, mirrored
like James' witches
standing shameless and possessed
at either end, the moonlight's
slack bed sheet beneath us.

—Maria Flook

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Elegy at summer's end

Now the darker cloth is drawn from closets,
The summer dresses put away
Whose flowers fade faster than even summer's own.
Now a minor music begins:
First frost and newfound clarity of sky.

I've left you sleeping in the summerhouse
To walk the loved edge of the lake
Where the southward flight of geese is more heard than seen,
As this summer may come to seem
A season less remembered than invented.

Already there have been too many words,
Too many versions of the way
The light fell across the water some certain dusk
And the "stunned" trees on the far shore
Caught fire: *candescence, conflagration, blaze.*

Now the darker cloth is drawn from closets,
And we who loved the world must learn
The language of absence: days foreshortened, empty rooms,
The irrevocable distance
Between the goodbye and the letting go.

—*Joe Bolton*

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On a woman of spirit who taught both piano and dance

Thanks to the Powers-That-Once-Were for all rouges
And powders, those blest cosmetic subterfuges
Which were her gloss upon the book of life;
  And to Madam L. herself, whose heart
Was a hummingbird's, and flew from art to art.

—*Donald Justice*

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Art

How simple everything could be!

by Jed Perl

"The Pastoral Landscape," a survey of bucolic imagery in Western art from 1500 to the mid-twentieth century, was mounted in Washington, D.C., this past winter as a joint venture of two great museums. The story began in the West Wing of the National Gallery with Giorgione, then moved through Annibale Carracci and Rembrandt to Watteau; at which point one had to hotfoot it across town to the Phillips Collection, where volume two opened with Corot, took in the English Romantics, French painting from Puvis and Gauguin to Bonnard and Matisse, and concluded with Milton Avery and Howard Hodgkin.[1]

The exhibition was very ambitious and very subtle, an interweaving of elusive themes: the urban craving for rural life, often an idealized version of rural life; the survival and revival, from century to century, of the woodland imagery of Latin literature; and the changing ways in which painters from Giorgione to Bonnard have used the translucency of oil paint to express their softly shaded responses to music, poetry, landscape, and love. In this remarkable museological adventure nothing was overstressed. The carefully selected mix of prints, drawings, and paintings ranged from masterpieces to curiosities. When one wasn't bowled over, one was set to thinking. And one was always brought back to the central idea, to the Giorgionesque vision of man in easy relation to nature.

At the heart of it all was David Rosand's fascinating catalogue essay, "Giorgione, Venice, and the Pastoral Vision." Here the fluidity of the Giorgionesque tradition is defined in opposition to the rigidities of what we have come to see as the neoclassical pastoral.[2] Rosand, a professor of art history at Columbia University, moves at a leisurely but purposeful pace. His revelations aren't underlined; they sneak up on you. As he tells the story, everything revolves around one's understanding of the *Concert champêtre* in the Louvre, a painting that was traditionally given to Giorgione but has often been attributed to Titian in recent decades. In arguing that the painting cannot be a Titian, Rosand sets up an opposition between two varieties of painting and defines an idea of the pastoral that cycles through the entire show. To those who would attribute the *Concert champêtre* to Titian, Rosand responds:

1 "The Pastoral Landscape: The Legacy of Venice and The Modern Vision" was jointly presented by the Phillips Collection and the National Gallery of Art and was on view simultaneously at the two institutions from November 6, 1988 to January 22, 1989. The exhibition's coordinators were Beverly Louise Brown of the National Gallery and Robert C. Cafritz of the Phillips Collection.

2 The exhibition catalogue, *Places of Delight: The Pastoral Landscape*, contains essays by Robert C. Cafritz, Lawrence Gowing, and David Rosand. It is published by Clarkson N. Potter and the Phillips Collection (270 pages, $45).

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> Titian's comparable images with amorous iconography are fundamentally different in concept and realization, more classically structured in composition, insistently respectful of the picture plane. Titian's early palette is chromatically clearer, his forms more crisply drawn, illuminated by a brighter sunlight. Nor are these paintings—the *Three Ages of Man*, for example—conceived in a pastoral mode; their compositional structures correspond rather to an allegorical function, in which clarity of form is essential for the equations of meaning.

It's characteristic of the mysteriousness of the pastoral tradition that Rosand defines it negatively—in terms of what it is not. His summary of Giorgione's structures is given by way of a summary of Titian's. "Titian's articulation," Rosand tells us, "is cleaner, his surfaces firmer, his spaces more deliberately layered; his art sounds a poetic note quite distinct in its clarity and solid realism from the veiled invitation that remains for us the culmination of Giorgione's achievement." This is the closest that Rosand can really come to describing that "veiled invitation." But his circumspect approach works brilliantly; and the show and the book, which is a free-standing scholarly achievement, flow from it. Robert C. Cafritz (he was until recently curator of nineteenth-century art at the Phillips) put the show together over a period of six years; he marshaled the talents of curators at the two museums, and wrote the four central chapters of the book, which join Rosand's opening essay to Lawrence Gowing's closing one on "The Modern Vision." It was Cafritz who organized the late Braque exhibition at the Phillips in 1982; now he has come up with another connoisseur's delight of a show.

The freedom of the pastoral tradition finds expression in the off-kilter, idiosyncratic compositions of many of the works that were on display in Washington. In the Giorgionesque world, figures are scattered through the landscape almost casually. Many compositions have the feeling of happy accidents. A painting such as *Paris Exposed on Mount Ida* (from Princeton) or the drawing of a *Landscape with an Old Nude Man* (from the Woodner Collection), both identified in the catalogue as "Circle of Giorgione," are like informally arranged fragments, bits of poetry excerpted from some larger whole. These works are only partly about nostalgia for a classical past. They're equally about a city-versus-country debate, and a yearning for rustic ease. Often, a couple of buildings perch high on the horizon line—a memory of city life that refuses to leave the sojourner in the country. The motif of a clutch of buildings, either rusticated or elegant, is presented over and over again, with the blunt insistence of a dream-obsession. And it's these strange buildings that survive into Watteau, the eighteenth-century painter who turns out to be the true inheritor of Giorgione's world.

In Rosand's essay a whole cycle of variants on the Giorgionesque tradition is described—a courtly pastoral, a religious pastoral, a satyric pastoral, a pastoral of hard labor. Rosand shows how pictorial themes evolve out of poetic conventions, both Roman and Renaissance; but, more important, he shows how the loose forms of the Giorgionesque tradition are transformed—by a shift in the proportions of a canvas, or by the lowering of a horizon line—to accommodate shades of meaning. And if Rosand cannot explain, for example, exactly why pastorals dealing with hard labor should call forth a deeper landscape space, he gives us enough clues so that we sense the ways in which structural shifts *are* emotional shifts. Thus, "Titian, whose inclination was to energize the landscape, took a leading and influential role in transposing pastoral into georgic"—into a world of Virgilian farm laborers. "The basic structure of [Titian's *Landscape with a Milkmaid*], with its distance between foreground figures and the fortified town on the horizon, may evoke certain pastoral values, but the figures themselves hardly have time to enjoy any escape from the cares of life: no idyllic nostalgia here, no music, no love. The couple—rather, family—must tend the flocks and cattle, feed the goats and milk the cows."

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As the show proceeded, we saw the critical role of prints—especially those after Titian, and the works of Domenico Campagnola (1500-1564)—in the dissemination of pastoral ideas; the classicizing of those ideas at the hands of Carracci and Claude Lorrain; the revitalizing of the Venetian pastoral in the baroque of Rubens and Rembrandt. At the National Gallery the show was subtitled "The Legacy of Venice" and ended with the fast dissolve of the rococo. Over at the Phillips, where "The Modern Vision" section was selected by Lawrence Gowing (who was, until recently, curatorial chairman of the collection), we watched the nineteenth-century artists pick up the story. Older concepts of the pastoral merged with the new, increasingly subjective and self-conscious nature poetry of the Romantics. Like most Englishmen, Gowing is quick to emphasize an English tradition. In my opinion, he takes us too far from the essential matter of the show as he focuses on Blake and his followers, especially the painter Samuel Palmer. Palmer was absolutely correct when he wrote in a notebook entry, of Blake's Virgilian wood engravings, that "there is in all such a mystic and dreamy glimmer as penetrates and kindles the inmost soul"; but this isn't the mood of the Venetian pastoral. The pastoral of Blake and Palmer is more a matter of graphic expression than of coloristic expression; its literary elements aren't saturated enough in optical experience. As for Constable, he has nothing much to do with Venice; early on, he's too prosaic in his realism; later on, too abstractly poetic. Perhaps what it comes down to is that Latin poetry has very little to do with the English experience of nature; whereas in France, where the language prides itself on its close links to Latin, some deep strain of feeling has been kept alive.

Ultimately, "The Pastoral Landscape" demonstrates what all of us knew—that Paris is the heir to Venice. It's in the art of Corot, Matisse, and Bonnard that an ongoing tradition emerges most clearly. (Cézanne is more Poussinesque than Giorgionesque.) Corot's *Genzano* (from the Phillips Collec-

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tion), an early Italian landscape with a boy in the foreground and the town a gaggle of buildings just above his head, has the subdued sweetness of Venice. In its casual yet resonant composition we see Corot expressing his own sense of communion with Watteau and Giorgione. And Matisse's *By the Sea (Golfe de Saint-Tropez)* (1904) carries into the twentieth century the surprising interrelationships of figure and nature, the melancholy sense of man's lost easiness in relation to the earth. The modesty of Matisse's little figures, who are enveloped in a sunset glow, is triumphantly, almost shockingly Giorgionesque. On the other hand, I find his *Luxe, calme et volupté*, with its more formal arrangements, less a part of this tradition; its echoes of Puvis, the man who invented what might be called the avant-garde neoclassical, draw us away from Venice.

So little is this show a matter of fixed assumptions, so much is it a matter of shifting implications, that when we arrive at the end of the catalogue we aren't at all surprised by Lawrence Gowing's assertion that "it was the element of realism in Claude, as in Giorgione and Bellini themselves, that qualified them to play a significant part in the artistic development that followed." This may, on the face of it, directly contradict Rosand's characterization of Giorgione as something other than "solid realism." But if Giorgione's nature is, as Rosand says, poeticized, it's poetry that keeps bringing us back to the actualities of experience.

Neither in the show nor in the (somewhat overdesigned) catalogue is anything said about what meaning the pastoral might have for us today. Relevance of the obvious sort is, quite rightly, something that Rosand and Cafritz avoid. Their sense of the past is so transparent, their feeling for art is expressed so immediately, that they don't have to plead relevance—they demonstrate it. In a sense, every generation of city dwellers finds a different way to live the pastoral idea; whether it's the "hard pastoral" of early twentieth-century back-to-nature radicals such as Helen and Scott Nearing; or the softer, vacation-on-Long-Island-or-in-Maine version of the New York poets; or the utopian, let's-change-the-world version of the Sixties communes.

Still, the pastoral idea goes out of focus as it approaches the present; our prejudices dim the picture. If Lawrence Gowing doesn't exactly clarify our present position, it may be because he's himself ambivalent about the continuation into the present of a tradition that has as much to do with the natural world as with poetic idealization. By ending with a semi-abstracted landscape painting by Howard Hodgkin, Gowing not only affirms his loyalty to England, he leaves us in a state of suspension. As it happens, Hodgkin's *In the Public Garden, Naples* (1981-2), which hung at the Phillips next to Braque's *The Shower* (1952), looked better than most Hodgkins I've seen—looked better for a time, until the Braque, which initially cast some of its own poetry across the room, began to upstage the Hodgkin. Ultimately, I find Hodgkin's poetry leaden; his invocations of landscape in the midst of abstract structures are both obvious and strained. The pastoral cannot, in any event, be an abstract tradition; not, at least, the Giorgionesque pastoral, which is dedicated to a perception of nature, and is anti-ideal. To Gowing, Hodgkin's nostalgic mood is the pastoral mood; to my eye, it looks more like a nostalgia for the ability that artists once had to inhabit the pastoral mood.

What the Washington show doesn't hint at is the many attempts in recent years to revive some more overt form of pastoral. In January, while the exhibition was up in Washington, the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in New York mounted a show called "The Modern Pastoral." I saw the Schoelkopf show before I got down to Washington; and only after I'd returned to New York did it occur to me that the sort of classical elegy that artists like Milet Andrejevic and Edward Schmidt specialize in has far more to do with the academicization of the pastoral than with the pastoral itself. Their figures do all the things that Rosand says Giorgione's do not:

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these contemporary nymphs and shepherds and pipers line up parallel to the picture plane, and dispose their arms and legs in arrangements that make geometric references to the shape of the canvas. The color here is dusty rather than sensuous—a memory of something that wasn't really experienced in the first place. The only artist included in the Schoelkopf show who might be said to have learned from the Venetians is Paul Georges; his big landscape is a very distant cousin of Annibale Carracci's marshy landscape in the National Gallery. While Milet Andrejevic upholds the letter of the pastoral law, it is probably Paul Georges, Fairfield Porter, Nell Blaine, and other artists of their painterly stripe who uphold its spirit.

The twentieth-century artist who emerges from the Washington show as most essential to this tradition is Bonnard. (Matisse, after all, is only pastoral early on.) Curiously, Bonnard wasn't presented front and center at the Phillips; though his paintings were in the show, they were mostly hung in the stairwell, on the way up to the galleries. What accounts for Gowing's reluctance to place Bonnard at the heart of the pastoral tradition? Perhaps he feels that Bonnard isn't a strict pastoralist, since Bonnard paints a resort town, where we're as often as not looking out the windows of a house at a countrified garden. Bonnard's semi-suburban scenarios shouldn't blind us to the Giorgionesque character of his odd jumps in scale, or the Giorgionesque way in which his small, awkward-looking figures fit into the unfolding spectacle. Venice lives on in Bonnard's rejection of classical grandeur and in his eccentric, meltingly innovative color.

One of the loveliest of this season's art books, *Bonnard at Le Cannet*,[3] highlights the late, pastoral Bonnard. The book is in the form of a walk through Bonnard's last house and garden (which have recently been preserved as a museum), and it shows how different compositions came out of different parts of the domestic environment. These were the years—1927 to his death in 1947—of Bonnard's supreme triumphs: the bathtubs, the studio with the yellow mimosa out the window. (Some of the paintings aren't so well known, including *Getting out of the Bath*, circa 1930, where the nude is the exact precursor for Balthus's Japanese figures.)

An introductory text by Jean Leymarie, who visited Bonnard on the Côte d'Azur in the years just after World War II, describes the pre-1950s Riviera as a modern Elysium. This is something we already knew from Colette; and if Bonnard is our Giorgione, Colette, stationed in her little house in St. Tropez, is our equivalent of the Renaissance pastoral poets such as Pietro Bembo. "Early this morning," one of Bembo's heroes tells, "when I had parted from my friends and left the castle in order to pursue my thoughts alone, taking a path which climbs the slope behind us, without knowing where I went, I reached the little grove which crowns the charming mountaintop as if it has been planted there by careful measurement." This courtly pastoral mode turns into the bohemian pastoral mode in Colette's *Break of Day* (1927), where the love affairs are as spontaneous and as surprising as those in Giorgione and Watteau. "Tomorrow," Colette writes, "I shall surprise the red dawn on the tamarisks wet with salty dew, and on the mock bamboos where a pearl hangs at the tip of each blue lance. The coast road that leads up from the night, the mist and sea; then a bath, work and rest. How simple everything could be!"

3 *Bonnard at Le Cannet*, by Michel Terrase; Pantheon, 126 pages, $39.95.

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Looking at Warhol

by Eric Gibson

Anyone who's been wondering whom, after Picasso, the Museum of Modern Art holds in highest esteem now has his answer. It is Andy Warhol, at least if exhibition space is any guide. Warhol, whose retrospective opened at the museum in February, was accorded more space than any other artist since the Modern turned the entire museum over to Picasso in 1980.[1] Barring a nook set aside for an architectural exhibition, the Warhol show filled every inch of temporary exhibition space and more. It took up both main floor and basement galleries and the small "Projects" area used to show emerging artists, and overflowed into public spaces as well. Though Warhol's helium-filled pillows were removed from the entrance hall after the opening festivities, the cafeteria and the hallway leading into it were still festooned with his bovine wallpaper. You had to want to see Warhol pretty badly. The only place to avoid him, aside from the permanent collection galleries upstairs, was the bathroom.

The Roman scale of the event was reflected in the high opinion of Warhol voiced by Kynaston McShine, senior curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art and organizer of the retrospective. For him, Warhol is "one of the most serious and . . . important artists of the twentieth century," a view heard these days from almost everyone who likes Warhol. Death changes the way we look at an artist. Rodin's reputation, mythic during his lifetime, plummeted as soon as he died. Warhol's, mythic during *his* lifetime, only got bigger.

In fact, as McShine's huge selection at the Modern tells us, Warhol deserved much worse. His ideas were one-shots that couldn't be developed, only restated with jack-hammer monotony. If you take a really hard look at his work, the kind museum curators are supposed to be trained to do, you will find that there's barely enough in it to fill even one of the temporary exhibition galleries. There are certainly no grounds for including all those car-crash and movie-star pictures, the dozens of commercial drawings, and the acres of wallpaper. In fact, a Warhol retrospective would be sufficient if it contained but a single work, the 1962 *Gold Marilyn*, which the museum itself owns. It's the ultimate Camp icon, everything that Warhol is about. By making the show so large, McShine opted for spectacle over substance, thus giving Warhol a retrospective on his own terms. Considering how little

1 "Andy Warhol: A Retrospective" is on view at the Museum of Modern Art through May 2. From there it travels to the Art Institute of Chicago (June 3 to August 13), the Hayward Gallery in London (September to November), the Museum Ludwig in Cologne (November to February 1990), the Palazzo Reale in Milan (March to May 1990), and the Pompidou Center in Paris (June to August 1990). The catalogue, edited by Kynaston McShine, is published by MOMA (479 pages, $60).

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substance there is in Warhol's work, perhaps we should not be surprised.

About a year ago, at a day-long Warhol symposium sponsored by the DIA Foundation, Charles F. Stuckey—the head curator of contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago—presented a paper proposing a view of Warhol's career as a succession of "art gags": witty responses to current developments in the art world aimed at deflating its tone of high seriousness. As an example, he cited Warhol's *Silver Clouds*, the helium-filled Mylar pillows shown at Leo Castelli's gallery in 1966. According to Stuckey, they were Warhol's arch one-upping of the Minimalists' insistence that sculpture be taken off the pedestal and placed directly on the floor. The tongue-in-cheek question they posed was: "If bases are so bad, then why not do away with them altogether—the floor is a kind of base after all—and make sculpture float?"

Of the many readings of Warhol that have appeared over the years, Stuckey's is one of the most plausible. Among the least is Carter Ratcliff's 1983 monograph, *Andy Warhol* (Abbeville Press). Ratcliff begins by taking at face value Warhol's comment that everything important in his art and life is right there on the surface. He then spends two hundred-odd pages tying himself in knots to avoid conclusions and interpretations that would violate this precept. The result is a bland chronicle composed of straightforward descriptions and strained art-historical analogies. (The worst: his comparison of the shadow patterns in Warhol's 1978 *Space Fruit* silkscreens with the paper fragments in Matisse's cutouts.)

But it isn't necessarily better to see Warhol as more than a blank. Writers as widely separated ideologically as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Robert Rosenblum have contributed absurd essays for the Modern's mammoth catalogue. For Buchloh, Warhol is the Great Subverter, an artist busily sawing the legs off modernist concepts of high art and culture. Rosenblum aims to legitimize Warhol by smothering him in historical precedents: he claims him as catalyst of, or important contributor to, almost every major phase of twentieth-century art. Somehow it's hard to imagine Andy playing such aggressively activist roles. And Buchloh's analysis—that Andy supposedly embodies "the critical negativity and the pervasive debris of corporate-dominated mass culture"—has more to do with the critic's politics than with Warhol's art.

Stuckey's Warhol-as-prankster interpretation works because it is so precisely placed. It makes him out to be neither more nor less than he was; it recognizes the fundamentally casual nature of his enterprise. But Stuckey's interpretation tells only part of the Warhol story. For Warhol's career was also a joke on the viewer. In many of his subjects—not the "classic" Brillos and Campbell's soup cans, but others—Warhol ridicules his audience in some way. Time after time he turns the simple act of looking against the spectator, forcing upon him the roles of voyeur and dunce. It was his ultimate act of destruction—to corrupt the act of looking at art as thoroughly as he had corrupted the act of making it.

Warhol never had any serious ambitions as an artist; he just wanted to "be" someone socially, to be famous. When he turned to fine art in the early Sixties, it was because it offered him access to a milieu far more glamorous, and promised far greater potential for celebrity, than did the world of fashion and commercial art he had started out in. By the time of his switch to fine art he had realized that the way to get out in front of the crowd was not simply to follow the herd but to pull off some provocative jest. It couldn't be a straightforward anti-art statement; those were already old hat. It had to be something "better," an anti-social statement capable of masquerading as high art. He learned how to do this early on. As an ungifted student at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, he submitted a self-portrait for his senior show entitled *The Broad Gave Me My Face, But I Can Pick My Own Nose*. It showed him doing precisely that, and caused a scandal among the faculty

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jury. Warhol had gotten himself known, not through talent and effort but through a *succès de scandale*.

Later, in New York, Warhol did a number of works whose subjects were advertisements and diagrams that referred to some intimate physical condition—corns, hernias, plastic surgery. The impersonality of the images as well as their arch character ensured that they would be read in narrow Pop Art terms without much attention being paid to their content. Yet in these paintings Warhol is deliberately placing the viewer in an awkward and embarrassed position, making him confront publicly matters customarily reserved for private attention. And the large scale on which he does so leaves the viewer with no place to hide—except, perhaps, in laughter. These paintings are thus very different from those of Warhol's contemporaries, with their relatively innocent subject matter. (Think of Roy Lichtenstein and his borrowings from comic books.) It seems likely that Warhol had more in mind than simply using the mass media in his work.

The *Disaster* pictures, however, are where Warhol's desire to compromise his audience is most clearly displayed. His 1962 *129 Die in Jet (Plane Crash)* is an enlarged reproduction of a tabloid newspaper front page announcing an airline disaster. Warhol must have felt he was onto something, because it was his biggest work until then. But retaining the newspaper format and hand-painting it himself diluted the aggressively shocking effect he was after. He apparently wanted something more direct, so he began silkscreening photos directly onto the canvas.

The *Disaster* paintings are garish things, images of car crashes, suicides, poisonings, race riots, and the assassination of President Kennedy. We're so used to seeing them in art books and magazine articles that when we actually confront them in a museum it's easy to think of them as only the originals of reproductions. But if you study them for any length of time, you realize with a shock that you're not so much looking at a Warhol as at a photograph of a grotesquely crumpled human body or a horrible tangle of metal. There's no way to distance yourself from the spectacle Warhol puts before you. By making tabloid images the subject of art, Warhol turns the viewer into a voyeur of violence and death. It is a role that reaches a kind of peak when Warhol himself becomes the focus of attention, as he does when he bares his abdomen for Richard Avedon to reveal the scars from the 1968 attempt on his life. It was the quintessential Warhol "disaster."

Warhol continues his attack on the viewer in three later series, the *Do It Yourself* paintings of 1962, the *Oxidation* series of 1978, and the *Rorschach* series of 1984. Of them all, *Do It Yourself* is the most benign. Warhol has exactly duplicated a child's paint-by-numbers canvas, filling in only a few of the numbered areas himself. In part, I believe, Warhol is satirizing the idea of aesthetic completeness, in particular the sort of "unfinished" yet aesthetically self-sufficient paintings we know from Cézanne. But at the same time he has his sights set on the viewer. Warhol's half-empty paintings send up the idea of "reading" a work of art, of re-creating through the scrutiny of the artist's marks and touches the process of its making. Warhol's incomplete "paintings" are not only aesthetically insufficient but offer the viewer virtually nothing to "read."

The *Oxidation* and *Rorschach* series are another matter. The *Oxidation* paintings look like bad Expressionist art—raggedly gestural tracery on a uniform ground. Can there be anyone left who doesn't know that the ground is a metal-based paint and that the image was "made" by Warhol and his assistants urinating on the canvas? There must be, because I overheard one couple at the exhibition pondering the title and wondering what type of acid had been used to get the greenish patina. The museum wasn't going to help them find out. The wall labels coyly listed the materials simply as "mixed media on metallic paint on canvas."

The *Oxidation* paintings are, of course, repellent objects, and intentionally so. Andy and the boys must have had a good laugh as

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they made their "paintings." They constitute Warhol's most savage insult to the viewer—and to art. They are abstractions meant to make a mockery of abstraction and the whole idea of "gesture" painting. (Warhol, who hated Abstract Expressionism, used to refer to its characteristic painterly strokes as "hash marks.") Thus they are intended to make a fool of the viewer by inviting him to accept as a genuine abstraction something that is at best a parody of it. Artmaking is here equated with relieving oneself. More grotesquely, Warhol's *Oxidation* paintings again transform the viewer into a kind of voyeur—of someone else's bodily functions.

By comparison, the *Rorschach* series is relatively tame. Consisting of enlarged reproductions of the patterns used in psychological testing—the so-called "Rorschach blots"—they are another joke on abstract painting. Warhol seems to be saying that art has no meaning other than the one the viewer projects onto it from the depths of his own psyche. This is an ironic distortion of Frank Stella's "what you see is what you see" remark. But in his choice of vehicles for this little jape, Warhol has offered the viewer something to think about—namely, the possibility that he is somehow not right in the head, just like the subjects of the real Rorschach tests. The message here is really the one behind all three series: that "art" is nothing more than what the viewer makes of it, and that the viewer is a pretty strange sort of person.

Modern art has been repeatedly dogged by the Emperor's New Clothes fable. It has been used by opponents of modern art as a metaphor for its innate bankruptcy. Warhol's career articulated that view through art. But he managed to make the idea do double duty. He made the *public* for modern art the butt of the joke even as it eagerly fawned over his work, unknowing. One more thing to thank him for, I suppose.

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The figurative Fifties

by Dan Hofstadter

For those (and they are legion) who know that a lot of good figurative painting went on in this country in the Fifties, the show called "The Figurative Fifties: New York Figurative Expressionism," mounted in October at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, came as no revelation. And the academic boxing of the subject—it stuck arbitrarily to one decade, and predictably excluded non-New York painters like Richard Diebenkorn—was hardly very compelling either. But the selection was rather a good one, and it also served as a welcome reminder of the halcyon days when New York had not yet been invaded by the art-sociopaths—those people who mouth the lingo of aesthetics the way hardened criminals talk of justice and remorse.

Among the artists represented were Willem de Kooning and Elaine de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Lester Johnson, Robert Goodnough, and Robert Beauchamp. Grace Hartigan's work showed her to be growing rapidly out of a sort of black period into a different mode, while George McNeil's reminded one of how hard he has struggled to achieve his extraordinary imagery of the past decade or so. Most interesting to this viewer, however—and I suppose it was largely a matter of the pictures offered—were the rooms devoted to Larry Rivers, Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, Jan Müller, and Bob Thompson.

Larry Rivers's paintings combined stylistic elements from Géricault, Pascin, Bonnard, Edwin Dickinson—apparently whatever he'd been looking at when he lifted his brush. The early ones, from up to about 1955, are really art school star paintings. Rivers had mastered the knack of rendering flesh in a smoky, Romantic, academic manner, and by inflating the figure on the canvas he got a *faux*-modern punch out of some very old-fashioned but still rather engaging material. The flesh is painted in loose washes pinned down with opaque dabs, and some parts go mistily out of focus. The general effect is extremely fussy. Whereas Dickinson blurs his paint at odd, illogical places—points where he saw that drifting edges happened to work—the young Rivers goes out of focus where a camera would, or simply where the rendering job has turned into a pain in the neck. Here and there he "loses" some inconvenient bit of the body the way a decorator "loses" a radiator or a switchplate. The great problem with this sort of illustrationy bravura is: what do you do with the "background"? Two of the portraits have conventional brown-sauce backgrounds, but Rivers clearly wasn't happy with this: he wanted to play the field, to make an organic, edge-to-edge composition. In the *Double Portrait of Berdie* he starts to model the whole surface in consonance with the modeling of the body, but grows (understandably) tired of this. He can't use broad color areas to suggest a domestic environment, because they would overwhelm the neutral, fidgety

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flesh tones he wants to feature. So he delineates here and there, in the manner of an architectural illustrator suggesting brickwork or tilework with occasional patches of pattern. The young Rivers seems a painter who cannot believe in the reality of what he is doing, and, sadly, we wish him a deeper faith in his dream. But soon Rivers trades in all the fragmentary scenography for a white field, which he sows with shards of imagery; functionally, the white field is a snappier version of the earlier brown-sauce background. Then gigantism strikes—the great American ailment—and the vast snowy spaces sprout a forest of patchy, vignetted "spot illustrations." The whole goofy enterprise will soon dovetail neatly with Pop Art.

Fairfield Porter, who instinctively let his figures bloom out of a carefully considered field, was represented in Philadelphia by six portrait-interiors. Porter was not terribly well served by his 1982 Boston Museum retrospective, which included too many routine pictures while omitting certain works of genius. That show revealed a tendency to look at Porter's work teleologically, as a march toward bigness and color saturation, but you can't do this with Porter, you have to take him as he comes. Several first-rate exhibitions at Hirschl & Adler have recently confirmed that he was at his best in portrait-interiors. He painted his attractive family and his nice houses, so some people still think his paintings are about personal reserve and domesticity, but this isn't so. I don't think Porter conformed to the usual notion of a well-bred person—he was too truculent and, I believe, too mendacious—but his highly housebroken sitters and his shabby-genteel rooms have deceived many viewers into seeing him as a modest, slightly evasive sort of painter—good, but not "exciting." In the essay on Porter for the Philadelphia catalogue, Brian O'Doherty writes that "his studies of figures seem to me uncomfortable . . . . The portraits promise social and painterly graces which they do not fulfill . . . . Porter's difficulties . . . show most clearly in the portraits, which hesitate to engage the sitters deeply." Actually, Porter was no more shy or uncomfortable with his sitters than Artur Schnabel was with the second movements of Beethoven's sonatas; his motifs were subtle, simply, and he matched them with his tact. Despite what O'Doherty suggests, good breeding—the accumulated social knowledge of the upper classes—had little to do with Porter's painterly grace, which was closer to the natural manners that anyone may have who cares about other people. Porter cared about paint and light and air; his pictures aren't meant to be existentially or psychologically arresting. The subjects weren't meant to be terribly interesting either, except in their paintability. Curiously enough, O'Doherty's essay returns in crucial ways to the misconception of Porter that prevailed in the Fifties and Sixties.

One suspects that Porter settled on his banal subjects expressly to lose his bearings in a familiar place. He saw that any sinner could go astray in the wilds; the novel thing was to go astray at home. Only when the subject matter dwindled to something as insipid as a Long Island living room could he tackle it in his backward, inside-out way. An inverse ratio seemed to operate: the duller the thing he painted, the more thrilling his way of painting it. Style was thrown into relief against subject matter. Later Porter found a release from all this, he discovered that certain things out there, like water, trees, and skies, could actually speak for themselves. Then his way of picture-making grew less palpable and also a little obvious. These obvious canvases inadvertently address the American taste.

Yet Porter detested our Puritanism and our dry solemn ugliness. In the Thirties he'd gone to Paris to learn from people who shamelessly reveled in the sense of beauty. He'd discovered Vuillard, whom he loved not for his "intimate" indoor spaces but for his way of juggling a picture together in an unexpected yet oddly natural fashion. Vuillard had disappointed the post-1918 avant-garde; he ended up painting the slightly flashy interiors of a slightly vulgar

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bourgeois crowd, and he seemed to neglect the psychology of his sitters. These days late Vuillard is starting to go up on the wall again (*Thadée Natanson* at the Orsay, *Mme. Guérin* at the Chicago Art Institute), and we can see, as Porter saw, that the finest of these thirty or so *portraits en situation* are highly provocative. Often they turn into "jewelry," as Bonnard put it, but even when they fail they do so with a sophistication that any painter might envy—like the panache of a debonair cardsharp on an unlucky night. Porter thought he could parlay Vuillard's cards into a royal flush; several of the paintings in the Philadelphia exhibition were drawn from his winning hand.

Porter's solution to Vuillard's problem was to quit focusing on the head and avoid breaking up the background. Porter refused to "stop" the paint, to clog it up around eyes or hands, and he insistently massed his color areas. It is utterly irrelevant if Porter's faces are blank or his figures go out of drawing—he was the antithesis of a draughtsman-psychologist like Eakins. His re-invention of painting had to do with the interchange between edge, transparency, ghosts of modeling, and the stretching of color—all painterly concerns. He got a new handle on every imaginable problem, like a translator translating into a language he only half knows. The hard edges, the modulations of tone occur where you least expect them; they follow the logic of color, of paint. And, as in good French painting, color usually equals paint.

When Vuillard went wrong it was in seeing too many distinctions: his surfaces can feel as feeble and friable as stale pastry. With Porter it was the other way around. His talent for generalization, for putting down a huge note of color, could drift into a weakness for the schematic, and certain flat, opaque expanses of interior wall could "stop" his paint—deprive it of pulse—as easily as Madame de Polignac's wallpaper "stopped" Vuillard's. But Porter knew how to dream in paint as well as any of the Abstract Expressionists, and in fact his automatisms in representation are more deeply interesting than their abstract automatisms, because, unlike theirs, his go against the grain of what he was doing. I happen to feel that he failed to grasp much about Vuillard, but such failures are part and parcel of talent, because to attend to anything *too* much is always to start copying it. There were New York painters of the Fifties who better understood the School of Paris, but their work never grew to be interesting—it was too cultivated and intelligent, and intelligence often hurts good painting, which needs a certain denseness, and egoism. At all events, Porter, quite like Vuillard, offers a reproach to our coarse pictorial culture, which endlessly repeats to itself that good painting is necessarily extreme. In a boorish age, Porter's paintings have natural manners. They have the spontaneity and warm aptness of a letter from an old friend.

Alex Katz also had some paintings in the show. These pieces have a lot to do with *la bella figura*—keeping up a brilliant face—and as always with this sort of endeavor the beholder wonders how much connection there is going to be between style and sustenance. Often people who wish to maintain a *bella figura* just ditch their concern with style when it comes to what really sustains them in life—family, for instance, or lots of food—but Katz's sixfold image of his wife announces, at this early date, the daring intention to merge manner and affect. Katz wants to get stylish with emotion and emotional with style, yet you see him grappling with the same problems that Porter and Rivers faced. In order to create an organic whole, he has to make the figures of a piece with the backgrounds, and he also has to reassure himself that his pictures are fictions, not old-fashioned imitations of nature; you sense a passionate attempt to possess the subject imaginatively, to turn it into metaphor and into drama. All the same, the early Katz is a slyboots: he "fills in" areas (a painter's taboo) with such dumb beautiful color that his paintings, virtuoso performances, seem easy and even trashy.

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Everything in the Philadelphia show was laughing and loose and open—what you might call "downtown Katz," as opposed to the "midtown Katz" who appeared somewhat later on.

Several rooms were given over to the paintings of Jan Müller and Bob Thompson. Müller was a German-born artist who had been brought here in the Thirties by his Communist father, and Bob Thompson was a black southerner who admired him and learned a lot from him. Both died young, Müller at thirty-six of rheumatic fever, and Thompson at twenty-eight of alcohol-related complications. Both were enormously talented, and both tried to prove that Expressionism, an inherently anti-traditional style, could be tapped as a pictorial tradition. They were admired chiefly by people who wanted painting to "mean" something, in the sense of being connected to European humanistic culture.

What this show revealed was how greatly they differed from each other. Müller's pictures have an absolutely authentic emotional ring—on this score they put Kiefer and Baselitz to shame—but they also lack brute painterly interest. For one thing, Müller never came up with an interesting poetic archetype for the body: his typical figure looks like a cross between Caspar the Ghost and a kid in a footed pajama suit. He also ended up overstretching his colors—whites, blacks, and primaries, in particular—and so invested them with a specious symbolic value, like a young country proudly minting fiat money. But then Müller *was* young—he never had time to develop fully—and his flaws were merely craft flaws, not errors of taste or tone.

Unlike Müller, who scrubbed paint onto the canvas like a German Expressionist (one thinks of Lovis Corinth or the Swiss German Cuno Amiet), Bob Thompson thought in terms of glowing color areas, like a French Symbolist. Both men created worlds where evil was exalted, but Thompson's world is more fun to look at and hence more diabolic—as viewers, we share in the wickedness. Many of his paintings are pretty crude, but often his color is superb, as in *The Assistance of a Woman*; and though he didn't draw the body any more vivaciously than Müller, he did weird wonderful things with tangents and overlaps, so his characters interest us. The Philadelphia show and the one at Vanderwoude/Tananbaum in New York last year reminded some of us of how fabulous Bob Thompson could be at his best. His death was a real calamity, both for the painting world and for black American culture.

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Is modernism the enemy? The case of Mies van der Rohe

by Roger Kimball

For me the test of value to be applied to a thinker is his eye for the great facts of his time. Only this can settle whether he is merely a clever architect of systems and principles, versed in definitions and analyses, or whether it is the soul of his time that speaks in his works and his intuitions.
—Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*

As the docket of modernism's alleged sins grows ever longer and more incriminatory—and what transgression, aesthetic or political, has modernism *not* been charged with by now?—it is inevitable that the great German-born architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) should come to occupy a prominent place on the prosecution's roster of malefactors. Few architects in this century garnered more praise or were more influential during their lifetimes; surely none so consummately epitomized modernism's spirit of embattled high seriousness. "One doesn't invent a new architecture every Monday morning," Mies is said to have admonished, no doubt anticipating an age that would flit through architectural styles the way a debutante runs through changes of clothes. With the rise of postmodernism in the late Sixties, it was only to be expected that Mies's stock, like that of modernism itself, should suffer a sharp decline. What had once been hailed as aesthetically exacting and a model of artistic dedication was now dismissed as elitist and socially retrograde. Not since the 1930s, when modernism was attacked by rather more grisly forces, has the architect of the Barcelona Pavilion, the Tugendhat House, and the Seagram Building been so violently reviled.

The bill of particulars against Mies is long and varied. At one time or another his work and influence have been blamed for everything from urban decay to the continued vigor of American capitalism. In that charter document of postmodernist chic, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), Robert Venturi helped set the stage for the current campaign against Mies by castigating what it pleased him to call the "puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture"—the language, that is to say, of Mies, Le Corbusier, Gropius, and other modernist pioneers. "Puritanical," "moral," "orthodox," "Modern" with a capital "M": for the postmodernist enemies of modernism, at least, a more damning list of adjectives is hard to imagine. Where Mies's stringent aesthetic demonstrated that less really could be more, Venturi's anti-Miesian brief for architectural "pluralism" dispensed with such encumbrances and insisted—in a *mot* that has become hardly less famous than the Miesian original—"Less is a bore."

The architectural critic and postmodernist impresario Charles Jencks (who is sometimes credited with first floating the term "postmodern") picked up where Venturi left off. In *Modern Movements in Architecture* (1973), his well-known and polemical survey

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of twentieth-century architectural trends, Jencks argued that Mies's unwavering commitment to aesthetic purity was "reductive" and often resulted in an "inarticulate architecture." But that complaint was only the beginning. Jencks also assured us that the ideal of aesthetic purity as espoused by Mies was at best "farcical," at worst "highly dangerous."

Since no respectable postmodernist can regard an earnest commitment to truth as anything but a kind of joke, it is perhaps not surprising that Jencks should have ridiculed Mies's intellectual seriousness—what he contemptuously dubbed Mies's "Platonism"—as "farcical." But "highly dangerous"? Here we touch upon a central ingredient in many recent assaults on modernism—namely, the claim that modernism's aesthetic idealism is covertly allied with political views that are rigid, authoritarian, or worse. This claim comes in various registers of intensity and is at bottom one of the chief presuppositions of the whole movement to disenfranchise high culture by reducing it to an expression of social and political forces. Proponents of the idea insist that they are exposing the dark, albeit unacknowledged, political commitments of a supposedly disinterested aesthetic; looked at in another way, however, they often appear as latter-day practitioners of that old tactic: art criticism via character assassination.

With a little help from the political theories of Karl Popper, Jencks provides a sterling illustration of this practice. Warning readers that "a belief in essences is one of the prime convictions of those who support a Closed Society," he argues that Mies's belief that architecture must strive to express the spiritual temper of the age drew him "to conservative arguments for a Closed Society." Never mind that Mies himself was staunchly apolitical, or that his theories about the vocation of modern architecture were the patient musings of a philosophically inclined artist; by the pliable logic that transforms things into their opposites, Jencks arrives at the stunning conclusion that Mies's "apoliticism, verging on fatalism, led [him] to accepting Nazism." Indeed, he blithely—and falsely—informs us that "when the Nazis came to power [Mies] worked for them up until 1937."

It would be consoling if Jencks's performance were merely an aberration in the annals of postmodernist criticism. Alas, this is not the case. As Elaine S. Hochman's new book, *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich,*[1] reminds us, such interpretations of both Mies and modernism have become common coin in the realm of academic reassessment. Professor Hochman, who teaches on the art history faculty at the New School for Social Research in New York City, offers her book partly as a history of Mies's behavior from the late Twenties through 1937, when he left Germany, and partly as an inquiry into the "moral principles" of his architectural vision. In fact, what she has given us is a demonstration of how thoroughly the antimodernist agenda of postmodernism has triumphed in academic letters.

This is not to suggest that Professor Hochman has contributed anything particularly novel to the debate about the nature and legacy of modernism or about the achievement of Mies. She is neither a cultural polemicist, like Venturi or Jencks, nor an architectural critic. Though presented as a work of "revisionist" history, *Architects of Fortune* is really a kind of anthology of what by now are received attitudes toward Mies and modernism. Accordingly, what makes her book noteworthy is not its originality but its banality. It commands our attention primarily as an example of how certain fashionable ideas become entrenched and taken for granted—become for their devotees the unexamined *donnée* of intellectual exchange.

True, Professor Hochman displays an eager diligence in ferreting out obscure details. Readers will learn more about Mies's

1 *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich*, by Elaine S. Hochman; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 382 pages, $22.50.

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Bangor, to the Penobscot, casein, 1966, 33" x 43"

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business dealings in Germany from 1933 to 1937 than they may have thought possible. And since those dealings were exceedingly meager—the plain truth is that Hitler's rise to power effectively ended Mies's career in Germany—Professor Hochman can pore over Mies's every professional move during those years in search of incriminating evidence. And pore she has. *Architects of Fortune* has been fifteen years in the making, we learn from its preface. A glance through the book's pages shows that if it uncovers nothing substantially new or scandalous about Mies it is not for the author's lack of trying: no potentially compromising recollection is too trivial to preserve, no damaging conjecture too untrustworthy to communicate. "Was Mies's own silence about this difficult period simply a manifestation of his generally uncommunicative nature," Professor Hochman asks, "or was there something he was trying to hide? Did he try to work for the Nazis? Did his efforts to remain in Germany practicing his profession differ from what others were doing or attempting to do?" These are the sort of insinuating questions that guide her inquiry.

In the event, Professor Hochman's patient detective work didn't turn up much. Except for providing a handful of new details, none of which really enlarges our view of Mies or the period under discussion, she treads familiar territory. Her observations about Hitler and the Third Reich, for instance, are mostly straight out of the textbook. Judging from the footnotes, the textbook of choice was William Shirer's best-seller, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Similarly, her opinions about Mies and modernist architecture are very much of the off-the-rack, ready-to-wear variety, the rack in question being furnished largely by Jencks & Co., with the occasional high-quality item borrowed from Mies's distinguished biographer, Franz Schulze.[2] In a misguided effort to engage in cultural criticism, she is also given to issuing highly

2 *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, by Franz Schulze, was published in 1985 by the University of Chicago Press.

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dubious pronouncements about the relation between art and society. In a characteristic burst of pontification, she assures us that "in return for their beneficent wisdom and aesthetic enlightenment, society has traditionally chosen to exempt artists, philosophers and poets from the common ethical standards by which ordinary individuals are judged." Hmmm. Just ask Socrates about society's largesse in this department. Or Shelley. Or Gauguin. Or . . . well, we don't want to belabor the point. Yet it must also be mentioned that Professor Hochman has a tendency to overwrite, making promiscuous use of the historical present, for example (we wait with Mies for a tram at Potsdamer Platz, etc.), and drawing freely on Christopher Isherwood's Berlin stories in an effort to impart a sense of period detail and "atmosphere" to her narrative.

Professor Hochman has not, however, confined her research to secondary sources. In her hunt for the goods on Mies, she has also availed herself of all manner of primary material. For example, in her acknowledgements she thanks "Mr. Albert Speer, who, for nearly a decade, kindly shared with me his intimate acquaintance with Hitler, the leading figures of the Third Reich, and the regime's architecture practices." She quotes frequently and uncritically from Speer's writings, and her notes often refer the reader to one or another "personal conversation" with Speer as support for judgments about Mies. Another major source was Philip Johnson, whose impish *obiter dicta* about architecture and Mies are also featured in *Architects of Fortune*. (A title, one cannot help thinking, that would have suited Johnson far better than Mies.) In other words, Professor Hochman has turned to those most impartial of sources, Hitler's chief architect and minister for armaments and Mies's infamous renegade disciple, to help discover the truth about Mies's activities under Hitler. The results are all that one might have predicted.

Architects of Fortune is divided into three main parts, the titles of which—"Mies," "Hitler," and "Confrontation"—may be said to sum up the burden of its argument. The titles of many of the seventeen individual chapters—"A Blind and Fateful Course," "'The Iron Fist,'" "Black Leather Boots and Bayonets," "'A Shameful, Dishonourable Fate,'" etc.—make it easy to forget that Mies was an architect, not a member of the SS. Yet Professor Hochman is not so crude as to suggest that Mies actually was a Nazi. There is, after all, the historical record gainsaying that. As she puts it in her preface, the question is not whether Mies "was a Nazi sympathizer" but "what it was in Mies's outlook that permitted him, encouraged him perhaps, to ignore the moral degeneracy around him." Her answer, in a word, is modernism. Like Jencks, who informed us that a belief in "essences" was conducive to repressive political views, Professor Hochman seems to believe that Mies's brand of modernism—involving as it did a commitment to architecture as high art and a belief that architecture possessed a spiritual vocation even in a secular age—revealed his kinship with Nazi ideology.

> For Hitler—no less than for his contemporaries, Mies and Gropius—architecture was an expression of the central spirit of an epoch, possessing some eternal magical power that could lead men from confusion and chaos into the serene realm of Order. . . . For them all, architecture both waged the war and assured the victory. In their visions of society, it was both cannon and crown, sword and halo; and with the exception of Gropius (who was more open-minded), each was convinced that his vision alone mirrored the footsteps of God. [3]

Reading this passage, it is hard to ignore certain troublesome details: that Mies was an architect while Hitler was a dictator in command of an entire nation; that we really

3 Professor Hochman reserves several generous parentheses for Gropius, whom she clearly regards more highly than Mies. E.g., "Gropius (who was personally kind and generous) saw architecture as serving people; Mies saw it as serving art."

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don't know what Mies's "vision of society" was, whereas Hitler managed to make his "vision" all too clear; that the "war" and "victory" in question were for Mies simply the effort to produce good buildings, whereas for Hitler they conjure up rather more ominous things. Even so, Professor Hochman finds a "striking resemblance of the motivating and dynamic forces that underlay [Mies's] style (and, by implication, all of architectural modernism) . . . to the principles that supported the Third Reich."

Professor Hochman is very keen on such "striking resemblances." Early in 1933, when Mies was head of the Bauhaus, he called on Alfred Rosenberg, a chief Nazi ideologue and himself an architect, to ask why the Nazis had closed the school and what could be done about it. "Mies and Rosenberg were more similar than either might have imagined or been willing to admit," Professor Hochman informs us. Both were brooding, taciturn personalities, we learn, and both had an unfortunate penchant for misty philosophizing. "Like ghosts of Hegel, both justified their philosophical beliefs on flimsy webs of metaphysics and apparent irrefutability, seeking the assurance of truth in certainty and simplification; and both would have denied the assertion of Jakob Burckhardt, the Swiss historian, that in the denial of complexity lay the essence of tyranny." Mies and Alfred Rosenberg? Mies and Alfred Rosenberg and the ghost of *Hegel*? (Incidentally, would Professor Hochman say that Hegel disagreed with Burckhardt's claim?)

Well, Mies did say (in an oft-repeated phrase) that "architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space." Did not the Nazis, too, glory in the will? Did they not proclaim their reign an epoch? And—the clincher—did not Hitler consider himself an architect? In one staggering passage, Professor Hochman goes so far as to assert that Mies finally left Germany in 1937 "not because he opposed Hitler, but because Hitler had very strong architectural views. Mies left, in fact, because Hitler fancied

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himself an architect." This is nonsense. By the time Hitler came to power, Mies was one of the two or three most famous architects in Germany. He finally decided to leave his homeland because, under the Nazis, he could not find work, because his architectural views were systematically castigated and ridiculed by the state, because his career had been thwarted at every turn by Party functionaries.

And then there is the issue of architectural modernism itself. Since the dubious nature of modernism is one of Professor Hochman's major themes, one might think she would have devoted considerable attention to setting forth her understanding of the phenomenon. Instead, all we get is an afterthought, a single footnote when the term "modernism" appears on page three of her preface. In this note, Professor Hochman remarks that both modernism and totalitarian architecture emerged out of neoclassicism. "The mutual genesis of these two opposing branches of twentieth-century German architecture out of the neoclassical tradition helps to explain the endless disputes between the modernists and their opponents as well as their noteworthy similarities." Does it really? If so, Professor Hochman has neglected to reveal how.

The truth is that simply mentioning this common root in the neo-classical tradition explains little about modernism or totalitarian architecture, and nothing at all about their supposed kinship. There can be no doubt that the formal vocabulary of neoclassical public architecture helped to furnish Hitler and Speer (as well as Mussolini and many others of far less disagreeable aspect) with their idea of architectural grandeur. In fact, neo-classicism continues to shape our notions of what is appropriate in public architecture. Nor is there any doubt that *one* source of inspiration for German modernism in its formative stages was the neo-classical tradition of Karl Friederich Schinkel. (There were also other, equally important, sources, including early twentieth-century American glass and concrete industrial building, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, and the geometrical abstractions of the de Stijl movement.) But modernism and totalitarian architecture took different things from neoclassicism. Speer, for example, emphasized and exaggerated its monumentality, transforming grandeur into something deliberately forbidding; for his part, Mies tended to emulate its formal clarity and simplicity of design, seeking to embody in his own architecture the cool rationality and balanced proportions of neo-classicism. And quite apart from what they took from neoclassicism, modernism and totalitarian architecture *aspired* to utterly different architectural visions.[4]

Unfortunately, Professor Hochman inhabits an intellectual climate where such distinctions blur under the pressure of her thesis, where Schinkel merges with Albert Speer, where the rigorously distilled aesthetic of a Mies van der Rohe is indistinguishable from the amateurish architectural fantasies of Adolf Hitler. "I do not wish to malign Mies, but to understand him," Professor Hochman writes; "and through this understanding, perhaps to grasp an attitude that he shared with so many of his fellow countrymen." And what was that shared attitude, exactly? Professor Hochman is not terribly precise about this, but she makes it clear enough that it has something do with political malfeasance. She subordinates everything to the idea—really, it is an *idée fixe*—that there is a deep conceptual continuity between modernism and totalitarianism. In the section of her book devoted to Hitler, for example, her main purpose in establishing the Führer's passionate attachment to architecture—it was, he is quoted as saying, the thing "nearest my heart"—is to show how similar Hitler's understanding of architecture was to Mies's. (The point being, one gathers, that Mies and Hitler, like Mies and

4 For an overview of Mies's distinctive contribution to modernist architecture, see my article "Modernism and Mies" in *Architectural Record*, March 1986, pages 73-77.

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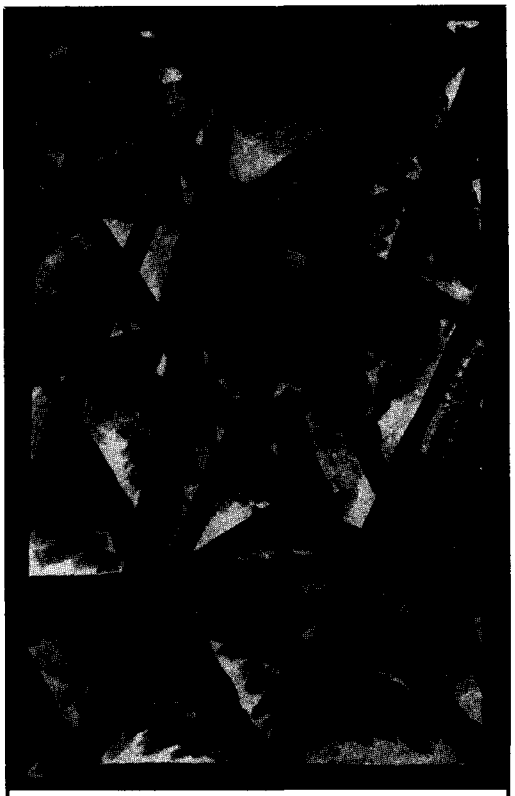
Rosenberg, "were more similar than either might have imagined or been willing to admit.") Indeed, it will be news to most students of Mies that "to Mies, it was clear that Hitler had a convincing understanding of architectural principles." Along the way we are also treated to a variety of penetrating and novel psychological insights. "Hitler seems to have suffered from a defective sense of reality," Professor Hochman reveals, as well as (poor fellow) a "deep-seated sense of inferiority."

Throughout her book, Professor Hochman keeps assuring us that Mies was a "great" architect who produced "beautiful" buildings. She does not actually discuss the aesthetic merits of any of Mies's works, however, and it is not long before one realizes that her glowing praise is preliminary to damning remarks about Mies's character or Miesian modernism. No doubt readers will be shocked to learn that Mies was not always a pleasant character. For one thing, he was overly rationalistic. "Mies's education pushed him toward rationality and conceptualization," Professor Hochman explains sadly, as if "rationality" and "conceptualization" were evidence of some spiritual blight. Moreover, he was aloof, self-absorbed, impatient, and worse. "His presence dominated, overpowered the space around him," Professor Hochman clucks: "he seemed totally withdrawn into the depths of himself, unconcerned with the intensity of this personal radiating force." These and other personality flaws, she confides, have even jeopardized his artistic standing. "[H]is authoritarian instincts, single-mindedness, and refusal to acknowledge the validity and diversity of human claims have been vigorously criticized and have triggered, to a great extent, much of the disrepute into which modernism has fallen since his death." Furthermore, Mies did not always practice what he preached: he "built as he lived"—whatever that means—but "he was not above saying one thing and building another." Then again, though Mies suffered from "a deep, pervasive, and lifelong



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insecurity about his intellectual qualifications" (see: just like Hitler!), he was intellectually and socially pretentious. "Even his name was not his own," Professor Hochman sallies, noting that her subject was christened Maria Ludwig Michael Mies and later joined his mother's tonier maiden name, "Rohe," to his own with the aristocratic-sounding "van der." In this context, it should perhaps also be noted that Professor Hochman can be selective in her telling of anecdotes. Thus she reports that when the Nazis gained their first majority in the Reichstag, in March 1933, nationalist students at the Bauhaus ran up a swastika. But she doesn't tell us that Mies, as director of the school, immediately had the banner taken down.

Nor is Professor Hochman above contradicting herself in order to achieve a certain effect. Near the end of her book, for example, she quotes Philip Johnson: "Whoever commissions buildings, buys me. I'm for sale. I'm a whore. I'm an artist." Professor Hochman repeats this famous—what to call it: confession? boast? advertisement?—from Johnson, adding that his "philosophy was very similar to that of Mies." But as Professor Hochman herself is at pains to show throughout *Architects of Fortune*, Mies's Olympian attitude toward his clients made him precisely the opposite of Johnson in this respect. Mies could on occasion be cajoled into compromising on what he considered inessential aspects of a project, but it is one of the main themes—and persistent criticisms—of *Architects of Fortune* that he was generally unbending in his commitment to excellence. "Anything less than perfection is unacceptable," he said upon turning down the offer to work on Hitler's plan to re-design Berlin in 1936. Professor Hochman critically cites Mies's remark that clients should be treated as "children": humored, but given good architecture, not what they mistakenly thought they wanted. For Professor Hochman, such sentiments are evidence of Mies's deplorable "arrogance," though when it comes to Philip Johnson she seems willing to forget this line of reasoning in order to present Mies, too, as a kind of artistic prostitute.

Hence it is ironical that much of the evidence Professor Hochman has collected serves rather to exculpate Mies than to condemn him. She relates a number of anecdotes that cast Mies in a courageous, almost heroic light. Consider, for example, the story of his refusal to resign his commission to design a textile exhibition in Berlin in 1937. After patronage for the exhibition had been peremptorily appropriated by Göring, who worried that it might upstage the government's own propaganda efforts, Mies was called in for questioning by the chairman of the Berlin city council and told that he must resign the commission. Mies replied:

> "I will not resign. You are exceeding your bounds in ordering me to do so."
>
> "Herr Professor, if I may say, it is you who are exceeding . . . "
>
> "I will not resign!" said Mies.
>
> "You must . . . "
>
> "I will not!"
>
> Reaching across the table to [a] manila folder . . . , the chairman took another tack. "Herr Professor," he said, as the room grew silent. "For your own sake, sir, . . . I think you should reconsider. There seems to be some incriminating evidence on you . . . ."
>
> "I . . . will . . . not . . . resign!" Mies repeated. . . .

He then stormed out of the room.

Of course, one inconvenient fact for anyone attempting to link modernism and Nazism is that, with the exception of some statements supporting Expressionist art by Goebbels in the early Thirties, the Nazis themselves were adamantly anti-modernist. Their adjective for modern art, remember, was *entartete*: degenerate. But if this makes it difficult to establish a deep connection between the arch-modernist Mies and the Nazis, it is by no means an insuperable obstacle. For one thing, as Professor

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Hochman rightly reminds us, Hitler did not completely reject modern architecture; he thought that its stripped-down, functional look was appropriate for certain industrial purposes. Nevertheless, when it came to public building—when it came to *architecture* as distinct from mere building—he categorically rejected modernism. It wasn't grand enough, it wasn't imposing enough, and of course by his lights it wasn't "German" enough. Thus it is not surprising that the Nazis had little patience with Mies. The house Mies designed for the 1931 Berlin Building Exhibition was dismissed as a "horse stable," his design for the Lange House was rejected as "un-German," and so on.

This is not to say that Mies consistently refused to work for the Nazis. As is well known, there are a handful of projects Mies undertook—or, more often, attempted to undertake—from 1933 through 1937 under state patronage. (It happens that Mies's chief source of income in the Thirties came not from architecture—he built almost nothing during this period—but from sales of his furniture.) For example, in February 1933, a few weeks after Hitler's rise to power, Mies, along with thirty other distinguished architects, competed for the commission to design the new Reichsbank in Berlin. Mies was one of six finalists, but his design was not in the end chosen. Then there was Mies's participation in the Reichskulturkammer, the State Culture Bureau, which was established at Goebbels's demand late in 1933. Though Goebbels later abandoned his support of modern art and "new forms" created by "young ideas," he initially instituted the Reichskulturkammer to *encourage* modern art and to challenge the more conservative cultural body headed by Alfred Rosenberg, then one of Goebbels's main political rivals. Mies also designed an exposition pavilion to represent Germany in the 1935 Brussels World's Fair. Though the pavilion was never built, Mies, in Franz Schulze's words, "was clearly doing what he could to gain the commission." His accompanying statement was full of the obligatory nationalistic phrases, and one of his rough designs includes a swastika. The only other project of Mies's whose commission was traceable to the government was the design of an exhibition for Deutsches Volk/Deutsche Arbeit Exposition in Berlin in 1934. As the architectural critic Martin Filler observed in an essay on Mies, this was "hardly an innocuous trade show," inasmuch as it was designed to highlight the dangers of racial impurity.[5] But it is also worth noting that while the Nazis allowed Mies to carry out his design, they disliked its modernist look enough to omit his name from the exhibition catalogue.

What are we to make of this list? According to László Moholy-Nagy's widow, Sibyl (whom Professor Hochman quotes), Mies's participation in these Nazi-sponsored projects was evidence of his "desperate attempts to play up to National Socialism" and showed that he was "a traitor to all of us." There can be no doubt that, at least until late 1934, Mies did what he could to win architectural commissions from the state. But his behavior hardly constituted "desperate attempts to play up to National Socialism"—for which he had nothing but contempt—let alone anything traitorous. Again, the truth of the case is perhaps best summed up by Schulze: "Mies's own attitude was a conflicted patchwork of indifference toward national politics in general, hostility toward Nazi philistinism in particular, dedication to architectural principle, and desire to build regardless of who asked him." As Schulze goes on to observe,

> in view of the catastrophe that engulfed Germany in the years after the Brussels project [1934], there is nothing to gain by picturing Mies as some of his admirers have tried, namely, as a staunch opponent of Nazism. This was, after all, a man who within eight years' time had designed a monument to a pair of Communist martyrs, a throne for a Spanish

5 "Building and Nothingness," by Martin Fuller; *The New York Review of Books*, June 12, 1986; pages 26-33.

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> king, a pavilion for a moderately socialist government, and another for a militantly right-wing totalitarian state! Politically Mies was a passive soul; his active moral energies were turned toward his art and away from practically all else.

There is one sense in which Professor Hochman might well agree with Schulze (though she does not quote his mitigating assessment). For as we have seen, the core of her criticism is not that Mies was a Nazi or a Nazi sympathizer but that his commitment to modernist architecture implicated him in a dangerously idealistic view of art, a view that ignored everyday political problems and subordinated the needs of particular individuals to an abstract idea of virtue. "[M]ore than political disdain," she writes, "simply feeling 'above it all' or aesthetic elitism lay behind the propensity of Mies and his peers to turn a blind eye to the moral perversities of the Third Reich. . . ." In her somewhat clotted prose, she reminds us that

> time and time again during this inquiry into Mies's actions, we are confronted with the spectacle of individuals who have been lauded for creating what has generally come to be acknowledged as the unique twentieth-century contribution to world culture pursuing participation in what is undoubtedly one of the century's most despised manifestations. Perhaps, in Mies's case, the reason lies in the striking resemblance of the motivating and dynamic forces that underlay his style (and, by implication, all of architectural modernism)—its idealism, deprecation of empirical reality, absolutism, and arrogance—to the principles that supported the Third Reich. Mies, like others of his generation, *including the Nazis* [my emphasis], perceived the existence of a singular meaning beyond the multifarious nature of daily life. They believed that beneath the seemingly chaotic variety, the inconsistencies and frequent absurdities that mark human existence lay something called "Truth," or "The Good," or, as Mies was fond of saying, "the spirit of the age" . . . . Life was perceived within a stern hierarchy of values in which all was sublimated toward this higher goal. For Mies, it was his architectural ideal; for the Nazis, it was the state.

But in fact, what this peroration tokens is a complete inability to distinguish between genuine idealism and its perversion. In ridiculing "something called 'Truth,' or 'The Good,'" Professor Hochman seeks to declare her correct ideological credentials, but succeeds merely in betraying her obtuseness. For a world in which Hitler's fantasies blend with the rigorous aesthetic of someone like Mies is more fantastic and incredible than any traditional idealism. By the time Professor Hochman has finished, not only is the "idealism" of Nazism scarcely distinguishable from modernism, it is scarcely distinguishable from orthodox Catholicism or any other non-materialistic philosophy. Even the emperor Charlemagne is suspect. Noting that the cathedral in Mies's hometown of Aachen was built by Charlemagne, Professor Hochman (who has it on the authority of Albert Speer) informs us that Hitler greatly admired the emperor. But of course: Charlemagne, too, was authoritarian; he, too, "instituted harsh and repressive laws" and he—like Hitler and Mies—was "certain that God was on his side."

Professor Hochman is quite right to stress the idealistic element in Mies's work. Like many modernists, he did believe that architecture was more than mere building, that it was called upon to express the ethos of a culture—what he, following Oswald Spengler, called the spirit of the age. But far from implicating him in despotism, this element of transcendence is something that ennobles Mies's work, raising it above the myriad Miesian knock-offs that may look like something of Mies's but lack his attention to detail, his sense of proportion, and above all his spirit. "The problem of Mies and the Third Reich is more than *just* a German issue or even an architectural one," Professor Hochman observes at the end of her book. Again, she is quite right. The case of Mies

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is in many ways emblematic of the fate of modernism and, indeed, of high culture itself in the late 1980s. But Professor Hochman, like Jencks and many others today, is deeply mistaken in thinking that the real task is to liberate art from any sort of idealism and hand it over to whatever political and cultural sentiments happen to be in vogue. As her book shows in excruciating detail, that is a prescription not for a deeper understanding of art but for its permanent bondage to ideological currency.

Remembering India

Nirad C. Chaudhuri Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921-1952. Addison-Wesley, 979 pages, $29.95

reviewed by David Pryce-Jones

The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian and now its successor, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!,* give a portrait of the slow but triumphant self-discovery of a powerful writer. During this process, Nirad Chaudhuri was in the grip of dramatic public events in India. Independence and the partition of the continent in 1948 were widely hailed as statesmanship and the reparation of imperial wrongdoing, but Chaudhuri drew quite another conclusion—that his country had no future.

The British and their counterparts, the Indian nationalists, in his view, had contrived a ruin for which ordinary people had to pay. Slogans about progress and modernity concealed corruption and decadence. Having escaped, Chaudhuri now lives in England, in a mood befitting a wise man of "stern, almost exultant despair."

One of the numerous books to have influenced Chaudhuri was *The Decline of the West*, and he may be seen as an Indian Spengler with a belief in the predestination of history. Granted the nature of the British and the Indians alike, he thinks, misunderstandings between them could only have ended in tragedy. With hindsight, it can be suggested that the British had no need to dig a pit for themselves, but at the time they could not have behaved except as they did. Yet the role of chance in his own literary evolution obliges Chaudhuri to take responsibility for himself and his achievement with a pride which is entirely justified. These books illuminate the mysterious area between literature and politics and individual character.

A large part of Chaudhuri's development rested initially on an adoption of heroic models. It seems marvelous that he could have found them in Kishorganj, where he was born in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. This small town on a river in Bengal was divided into Hindu and Muslim communities immemorially settled in their ways, contented, yet about to be shaken and destroyed by a violence that nobody could have imagined.

There never was a time, Chaudhuri recalls, when he did not know who were the leading personalities of the day, from the Queen and Empress herself to her ministers and generals. The likes of Napoleon, Raphael, Milton, and Burke were household names. His father, part lawyer and part merchant, read him a passage from Shakespeare and made him recite it by heart. Bengalis by the thousand took for granted such familiarity with the world's high culture, it seems, and the Chaudhuri family was by no means exceptional. The youthful Nirad found models of enlightenment in Lytton Strachey, Middleton Murry, Percy Lubbock, and others. In order to read Sorel or Aulard, as well as Rémy de Gourmont and above all Julien Benda, a freethinker like himself, he learned French. Next came German, for the sake of Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* ("Textbook on the Historical Method").

This formidable autodidact writes a splendid rhetorical prose, adorned with quotations and allusions caught on the wing from his eminent peers. Among the multifarious subjects to have fired his imagination was artillery, especially the design of breechblocks, and naval history, French wines, the

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origins of man, the Latin names of trees and plants, the growth of Calcutta and Delhi, and Western music. Here was someone absorbing equally *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Aeroplane*, and *The Gramophone*. When he found himself alone with the wife who had been married to him according to customary arrangements between families, he asked her to spell Beethoven.

Such a dynamo for acquiring knowledge had an inappropriate frame. Chaudhuri pokes fun at himself as someone just above five feet, weak in physique. At various times he was ill and hungry, with only his father and brothers between him and destitution. Even in the tightest of squeezes, however, he continued to buy books on credit, or a box of educational bricks for his son. It is typical of his combative humor that he describes with delight how he once kicked downstairs a man who offered him a bribe, and also how he beat another, who had insulted him for being a "servant," until this fellow wept. "Gandhi suggested the primitive primate tarsier to me," is a good example of how Chaudhuri combines style and outlook. This passage continues, "But a beatific unworldly look suffused what was basically mere animal innocence," concluding with the sweep, "There was not a trace on his face of the repulsive arrogance which disfigures the face of every Hindu holy man." He likes playfulness, too, as in a chapter entitled "Mount Batten piled on Mount Attlee."

It was all very well to be a strong-minded individualist and libertarian with marked literary tastes, Chaudhuri realized early, but he had to find a proper outlet, too. Moving to Calcutta, he was first a clerk in a department of military accounts, and then a journalist. His first published articles were in English in 1925 and in his native Bengali two years later. So hard was it to advance in literary circles that he is perhaps overanxious in his memoirs to fight again some battles of long ago and far away, reprinting articles which prove him to have been right.

If Chaudhuri was unpopular or marginal, did the fault lie in him or in circumstances? Gradually he sensed that the political climate between the wars was thwarting and depressing not just him but everyone else as well. A complete reappraisal was needed of the relationship between India and Great Britain.

It is moving to read how Chaudhuri came to repudiate Indian nationalism on the one hand and on the other the complacency or self-delusion that the British showed at each step on the road to their rout. He well remembers how the nationalist movement first began, in Bengal in 1906, in response to a British proposal to divide the province for administrative purposes. This could only set Hindus and Muslims against each other. Young men mustered and drilled in secret, revolvers were passed from hand to hand in conspiracies. Chaudhuri's repudiation of nationalism is all the more intense because he himself had once felt these excitements.

Chaudhuri is unsparing in criticizing the British when they deserve it, for their arrogance, for the way that they educated Indians, above all Bengalis, to be like themselves but did not then accept them as equals, on the contrary putting them down with subtle snobbery against which there was no appeal. The presence of the British in India always implied that the two parties must meet on equal terms, and the failure to bring about anything of the kind was a contradiction unbearable to an Indian.

Nationalists argued that the British had conquered an India which had been prospering materially and culturally, only to exploit and plunder it. To Chaudhuri, with his reading of history, this argument was a self-serving lie, and out of it grew his doubts. Eighteenth-century India had been stagnant: Hinduism and Islam had decayed to mere forms. Far from exploiting India, the British had vitalized the whole continent. In all Indian history, Chaudhuri writes, there had been no better government than that of the British. Many great Bengalis whom he had admired in his childhood had appreciated this, welcoming Anglo-Indian civilization. One example was Rabindranath Tagore, the

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Nobel prize-winning author of works of poetry, drama, fiction, and philosophy, to whom Chaudhuri devotes a chapter of elegy.

Nationalism itself was copied from the British, something factitious and imported, a counter-reaction, unthinkable in the old India of custom and religious identity. Leaders of Indian nationalism like Gandhi and Nehru did not grasp the extent to which they had absorbed British values and were simply transferring them onto Indians. This was the point at which Chaudhuri's own imitation of heroic models served him. He was in a position to judge how much of the nationalist claims involved self-deception and fraudulence. Accordingly he could trust the likes of Gandhi and Nehru neither as firsthand Indians nor as secondhand Englishmen. Manipulating where they had been manipulated, these men were all the more dangerous because so willingly and unconsciously dupes of their careerist ambitions. Under borrowed trappings, the age-old xenophobia of Hindus was easily discerned. Nationalism, Chaudhuri concluded, was nothing more than the mutual hate of Hindus and Muslims, and the hate of both for the British. Such hate was backward-looking, and a menace to him, to his country, and to everything worthwhile in it.

To have set himself against nationalism was not only an intellectual feat but an act of civic courage. Not hiding his opinions, he survived by becoming private secretary to Sarat Chandra Bose, a prominent nationalist and brother of the even better known Subha Chandra Bose. The quarrel between Gandhi and the Bose brothers threatened to split the nationalist movement, but in Chaudhuri's view it was a question of self-assertion, without intellectual significance. *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* contains invaluable eyewitness observations of Gandhi and his entourage, and of the strange and stricken Bose brothers.

The war was an opportunity for the nationalists to weaken Britain by supporting Hitler, an incarnation of Vishnu, as one extremist told Chaudhuri. Subha Chandra Bose fled to Germany, then to Japan, where he raised a collaborationist army. Sarat Chandra Bose was arrested. Even their wartime sentiments should not be considered real defiance of the British, but rather an expression of the wish to be on the winning side which Chaudhuri finds a dominant and despicable trait in his countrymen. Committing himself to the Allies, Chaudhuri became a commentator on All India Radio, putting to good use his knowledge of military matters. He felt a pain in the heart when in December 1941 Japanese aircraft sank the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* (not the *Renown*, as he calls the ship in a rare lapse).

By 1945, the British were in a position of apparent strength in India, where Wavell and Auchinleck commanded veteran divisions, and the nationalists had been thoroughly discredited. Subha Chandra Bose had died in a flying accident on his way to surrender to the Soviets, but other leading collaborators were arrested. Failure to bring them to trial created the impression that British policy could be deflected by agitation and rioting. The man in the street concluded that the British hesitated because they were actually weak, and he rallied not to the nationalist cause, because effectively there was no such unitary thing, but to his own people, Hindu or Muslim, each seeking to win as much as possible. Communal massacres, partition into India and Pakistan and then Bangladesh, and incessant warfare and instability have been the result.

If the British had been ceding to *force majeure*, Chaudhuri might have forgiven them. But such was not the case. Rather, their abandonment of India was due to a loss of will. The charge against the British is that they played fast and loose with the Indian future, abrogating responsibility for those they ruled, introducing chaos, *ratting*, in Chaudhuri's dismissive word.

Perhaps the most absurd of misconceptions was that Gandhi was a genuine representative of the people, with a genuine constituency behind him, and a holy man

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besides. Holiness in India, Chaudhuri emphasizes, is a factor of power. Defining themselves primarily as Hindus or Muslims, Indians could be mobilized into fanatical mobs defending what they believed to be group interests and identities, but constituencies, as understood in the West, could not be made of them. Britain in effect handed over the continent to those Hindus or Muslims who had the ruthlessness to fanaticize and then tyrannize their own kind for their own purposes.

To Chaudhuri, the secondhand or imitation Englishman had won, and India at once became a pitiful Third World landmass, emitting for all to hear the unlovely complaints of those who have lost true identity and self-respect. What he calls "the Oxfam spirit" rules—in other words, the eagerness of the poor to be humiliated by accepting charity from do-gooding organizations like Oxfam (Oxford Committee for Famine Relief). In the way in which they grabbed whatever rewards were available, literally looting the state, the nationalists proved what their values were. Everyone could see who was the winning side now, and made sure to be on it. Anglo-Indian civilization has come to nothing. What Chaudhuri mourns in particular is the death of his own Bengali tradition. In places like Kishorganj, fathers now have never heard of Shakespeare, Raphael, or Napoleon. No brilliant child now sits on the river bank as he once did, deep into Rémy de Gourmont or breech-blocks, or whatever the modern equivalent might be. There will never be another Tagore. India has been rebarbarized.

In the eyes of many Hindus, Chaudhuri occupies a position like Salman Rushdie's among Muslims. (In *The Satanic Verses,* Rushdie describes Chaudhuri's intelligence as "impish and colonial.") Both men are regarded as renegades, traitors to their own kind, who have put themselves beyond the pale by moving to England and publishing their critiques from its safe confines. In fact the two writers are not comparable. Rushdie is another in the line of imitators, drawing from Western education a disaffection completely characteristic of the contemporary Western intellectual, leading him to satirize the British and Muslims alike. In these memoirs and in other writings, notably *A Passage to England*, Chaudhuri has in contrast examined the inner nature of the British and their culture, seeking to fathom the reasons why the British abandoned the Indians so abruptly and shamefully, canceling out the good work of two centuries.

What he has discovered is the real shock of his life, and an irony which seems to mock his most profound aspirations. At the very moment when high-minded Indians like himself were adapting for themselves the heroic models of British civilization, that civilization was losing faith in itself, ceasing to be humane and universal. Indians were acquiring a beautiful but empty shell, without substance and spirit. Thanks to nationalism, Indians received from Western civilization what was not worth having. What with spreading Americanization as well, the future now holds only the "mindless aping of the lowest things in the Western democratic culture." Rulers and ruled meet at last on equal terms, but the meeting serves no civilizing purpose to either. How could Indians have guessed this fate, or protected themselves against the turn of history? Chaudhuri is the first person from what was once the British Empire to have the insight that the British betrayed others for whom they were responsible because they had already betrayed themselves.

It is pointless to repine. For him to have settled in England and to have written his books may also reveal that Chaudhuri does not push the logic of predetermination to an absolute conclusion. Why else should his despair be exultant? In an epilogue, he makes a fine last-ditch defense of the powers of the mind against unreason and ignorance. In spite of everything, there remains the word, or, as this fierce and solitary critic of the mass age might prefer, *magna est veritas et praevalet.*

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Games computers play

Brad Leithauser Hence. Knopf, 320 pages, $18.95

reviewed by David Gurewich

I doubt I will raise eyebrows by confessing that this review was written with the help of a word-processing program. I feel quite safe seeing my words appear in yellow letters on a black screen. The computer bears me no malice, nor does it have an opinion of my literary ability. If it malfunctions, the problem is caused by the manufacturer's oversight, or my own ignorance. The computer is a machine—nothing more, nothing less.

Even so, a growing number of scientists are convinced that one day my computer will reject my commas or debate my views of the universe. This optimistic faith in the power of machines only enhances the fears of those who are still more comfortable with a legal pad and a sharpened pencil. In *Hence*, his brave new novel, the poet and novelist Brad Leithauser plunges into the heart of this dichotomy, playing with our preconceived notions of man versus machine. He is no Luddite, and is far from viewing the conflict in black and white, but his forecast for humanity in a world of machines is not very sunny.

In *Hence*, the battlefield is the chessboard, as Tim Briggs, a twenty-year-old prodigy, plays ANNDY, an M.I.T.-programmed computer. The match is actually a publicity stunt for the Congam Corporation, who built the computer. Since the rules of chess have not changed in thousands of years, it might seem that the computer would have no trouble beating the pants off a human being in a game so ritualized. Yet even today, according to the United States Chess Federation, the best mainframe computer has a ranking of only about 2,400, which means that there are at least a few hundred human beings who can beat the best machine.

Mr. Leithauser pushes the time slightly forward, to 1993. Things have changed only marginally in Cambridge, Mass., where the novel takes place. There are mocha bagels, there is more madness on cable television, and, of course, there is ANNDY, capable of considering 365,000 positions in a second. The computer is daunting, but not necessarily insuperable. As Tim's trainer Imre never tires of saying, "Play the man, not the board." In this case, Imre changes "man" to "machine" and designs a tactic whereby Tim comes up with not the best moves but the most unusual ones—to throw ANNDY out of whack. Ultimately, it *is* men that Tim has to play, of course, the men behind the machine: Oliver Conant, the nerdy chief programmer, and his mentor Albrecht Zehnder, the self-described "freedom fighter" for computer rights. It is in this confrontation that the novel reaches high gear.

To the relief of those unable to tell a knight from a rook, Mr. Leithauser does not erect Sicilian defenses to ward off the uninitiated. Chess to him is poetry: "It is like a conversation between the deaf, this flood of hand signals, with its overlapping stops and starts, this onrush of motions that simply cannot keep pace with the thoughts that fly before it." It is a pleasure to read someone who can strike such a fine balance between the cerebral and the visceral. But we should not leap to the conclusion that Tim sees himself as an artist: ". . . Timothy knows that [music] is supposed to be so much like chess, but it isn't at all really: in the world of music, one never had to admit to being checkmated."

Tim is an all-American boy genius, a cross between Luzhin, Nabokov's fictional protagonist in *The Defense*, and Bobby Fisher, the real-life prodigy and arguably the greatest chess player in history. Like Luzhin, Tim is obsessed with chess at the expense of the world outside; like Fisher, he quickly becomes aware of the value of a properly cultivated public image; like both of them, he slides into mental and emotional instability; unlike them, he crawls back.

ANNDY's handlers are well-rounded, flesh-and-blood characters. Zehnder, "the

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author of some curious essays, utopian and misanthropic by turns, in *The New York Review of Books*," is a techno-oracle who envisions the day when computers will have emotions. In his absentminded-professor way, he is blissfully unaware of atmospheric conditions and finds himself in a Hawaiian shirt in the middle of a snowstorm. Conant, "small and bony and homely, pasty-faced and pimply," dreams of designing software that can write jazz music à la Wynton Marsalis and Keith Jarrett.

Tim's adversaries may be symbols of computer culture, but they are not caricatures, and Mr. Leithauser depicts them with dead-on accuracy. For example, they program ANNDY to flash supposedly funny messages like "OUCH! YOU'VE GOT THE SMARTS THAT SMART" and "OOH, I THINK I MUST HAVE DRUNK TOO MUCH LAST NIGHT." This is vintage hacker humor—going beyond user-friendly to user-familiar. The messages are a hit with the crowd that gathers for the big match; but they distract and enrage Tim, who is used to the stark, gentlemanly etiquette of chess matches that take place away from the media's glaring attention.

Thus, Mr. Leithauser uses chess and computers as material for a story about people. The book is rife with ideas, but it is populated with compelling characters positioned at odd angles to one another. Tim is not ANNDY's diametrical opposite: he adheres stubbornly to his own brand of logic—for instance, when he insists at the hotel coffee shop that his hamburger be cut in two. (The waiter, trained in a different kind of logic, does not understand.) Tim's brother Garner, a priggish adopted Brahmin, is also logical; when he helps Tim shop for clothes, he rationally chooses a blend of synthetic and cotton: Tim is not likely to change his shirt every day, he reasons, or every other day.

Yet Tim's progress from an aw-shucks hayseed impressed by expense-account opulence to a folk hero comfortable with the limelight is not entirely rational. In the middle of the chess match, his libido interferes. Smitten with the PR girl Vicky Schmidt, and terrified at the awakening of his sexuality—the ultimate barrier between the human and the machine—he flees Boston for his hometown of Victoria, Indiana. There he gets engaged to Linda, the girl next door (literally). She is neither "Victorian" nor glamorous like Vicky. (She treats sex matter-of-factly and eats potato chips, not sushi.) The two of them eventually set up a trailer-park-like household in the luxury of the Totaplex Hotel.

The novel's subsidiary characters are richly drawn. Besides Linda and Vicky, they include Tim's mother, Doris, whom Garner calls a "foolish old woman"; Tim's sister, matronly Nettie; Jack Westman, the yuppie Congam executive, brash and calculating; and Imre, the eccentric Hungarian expatriate who does not go anywhere without his wife's perfectly cut sandwiches. Mr. Leithauser treats these characters with a bit of satiric condescension, especially Doris ("She has seen her own son on TV, and what more could a mother hope to behold in this life?"), but his relentless attention to detail prevents them from becoming cartoons.

When Vicky suggests to Imre that Tim prolong his escape from the match—the Congam Corporation won't object, since it loves the publicity around this "modern-day John Henry"—*Hence* moves away from the chessboard and into the larger world, most of which—surprise, surprise—is run by Congam. Naturally, the targets for satire abound. The Totaplex Hotel, for example: "TOTAlly modern, your business and pleasure, your working and resting, living- and leisure-comPLEX." Yet the satire is double-edged: "Timothy perceives what he suspects is too subtle for most people to notice right away: the capital letters spell TOTAPLEX." Good boy, Timmy.

Mr. Leithauser is mordant when he parodies the highbrow magazines' comments on the match. And he is funny when he quotes from the weather-laden diary of Tim's peculiar father: "The steady rain which began shortly before noon gave way to

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drizzle at 2:15, which itself gave way to steady rain at 2:20." He is less successful when he ventures into "lowbrow" humor—the aforementioned mocha bagel, or a reference to Rocky XXVII, or to television preachers. After all, television parodies itself.

On the other hand, with Reverend Rabbitt, the self-mutilating preacher who floods the screen with blood, Mr. Leithauser has loftier goals. The Reverend puts the country under his spell and turns into a quasi-apocalyptic figure. Whereas Tim preaches homilies to the media ("People need to see that they can do anything, once they put their minds to it"), the Reverend erupts in fire and brimstone: "[My attackers] have lied about the Lord because they have wronged me . . . . I have stepped forth bled from the filth of the Lie to show them Truth." Tim identifies with the Reverend, whom he sees as a fellow truth-seeker destroyed by the philistines, but another part of him feels kinship with his competitor for magazine covers—Masahiro Tatsumi, a musical prodigy. Tatsumi, we learn, grew up in isolation on a Japanese island without the benefit of a musical education, yet he manages to compose music that is on a par with Mozart and Bach. According to Zehnder, the boy's father managed to program him like a computer.

Among other motifs here, I could mention Tim's sister Nettie's "normal" life, which provides a vivid contrast to all this tumult with its focus on children and family duties. Or Tim and Garner's inability to get over the accidental death of Tim's twin brother. Or "going home again," something that Tim, unlike Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant, manages to achieve. The book is so saturated with themes and subplots that I almost expected a KGB agent to materialize at some point: the Russians take chess seriously enough.

Hence is an attempt to create nothing less than a *complete* novel: one of grand themes, plots and subplots, clever philosophical puns and paradoxes. But all themes are not created equal. We need to step back and look at the "big picture" to find the dominant one

Garo
ANTREASIAN
David
ARONSON
Paul
CADMUS
Linda
CHAPMAN
Donald
De LUE
Enrico
DONATI
Matsumi
KANEMITSU
Peter
MILTON
Henry
MOORE
Pablo
PICASSO
Auguste
RODIN
Sarah
SUPPLEE
William
ZORACH
Francisco
ZUNIGA

LOUIS NEWMAN
GALLERIES
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here. You see, *Hence* is not written by Mr. Leithauser. It is a "meditation in voices," composed by Garner Briggs and re-issued in 2025 by Rearguard Press—for nostalgia's sake, writes its editor, one Robin Orrin, since books have become obsolete by then.

It's a nice touch. It's plain wonderful to be reading in 1989 of the goings-on in 1993, preambled from the point of view of 2025. In fact, the whole foreword, however lovely a parody of a bibliophile's prissy style, serves as a twenty-three-page-long warning. "This is a serious modernist novel," it seems to say. "Enter at your own risk. Seekers of cheap thrills will be turned away." But when you combine the point it makes—that books will have become a curiosity in the not-too-distant future—with the novel's forward-looking title, we begin to see the forest behind this spectacular arboretum. Mr. Leithauser views our era—or 1993, as he coyly suggests—as the one that will witness a farewell to culture as we know it, and its replacement by ANNDYs. *Hence*, as a title, signals the new era that will arrive henceforth; the passage of the old, silly one is accompanied by all the requisite apocalyptic signs, including a self-slashing preacher and an amazing Japanese Mozart.

Mr. Leithauser may mock highbrow publications (including this one) with much relish, yet he appears to feel an affinity with their seemingly outdated obsessions:

> When computers first learn to write music that brings tears to the eyes, tenured philosophers will be still writing throat-clearing articles for *The New York Review of Books* designed to illuminate at long last what it was that Aristotle really said, or whether Plato was right or wrong.

This is sarcasm all right, yet sarcasm laced with nostalgia, and maybe a little hope.

Which brings us back to the dreaded world of software and modems. In 2030, will a computer insist that Mr. Leithauser write poems in Spenserian stanzas?

I think we have more than a prayer. In the year 1989, the search for a computer with human creativity remains not unlike the alchemists' search for gold—which led to the emergence of modern chemistry. The quest can be more valuable than the goal. In a way, this applies to Mr. Leithauser's book as well. Travelling through his world is pure, unadulterated fun, even if we must take his forebodings about the computer age with a grain of salt. After all, it was not ANNDY that Tim played—but its nerdy designers.

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Notebook

How not to speak for the humanities

by D. G. Myers

Intellectuals have few responsibilities, but one is to know the refutations of their best ideas. Those of us who think the study of man is in decay have some responsibility, then, to pay attention to a recent pamphlet issued by the American Council of Learned Societies. Entitled "Speaking for the Humanities" and written by a committee of six academics, including George Levine (*Darwin and the Novelists*), Peter Brooks (*Reading for the Plot*), Jonathan Culler (*The Pursuit of Signs*), and E. Ann Kaplan (*Postmodernism and Its Discontents*), the pamphlet is a reply to critics of the humanities as they are taught and studied now.[1] The humanities, according to the authors, are "being attacked unfairly" and, in fact, are "living through a revival."

Although written in committee prose, the pamphlet is worthy of attention. For one thing, five of its six authors are directors of interdisciplinary humanities centers. These research centers, of which there are "close to 300 throughout the country," the authors proudly say, are a relatively new phenomenon in the humanities. Robert Nisbet in *The Degradation of Academic Dogma* has labeled the directors of such centers "the new men of power," no longer attached to the traditional seat of authority in separate departments of study. And as such, the authors of "Speaking for the Humanities" are the spokesmen for a shift away from the traditional disciplines and toward uncharted modishness in humanistic study. Their pamphlet (co-signed by twenty-one other professors) diagrams the thinking behind the shift.

The authors defend the humanities against six charges: (1) they have become specialized and professionalized to a degree that renders them "unintelligible to those outside academia"; (2) they have abandoned any pretense of objectivity in order to pursue an unashamedly ideological agenda; (3) they have become "overly concerned with theory and methodology to the neglect of humanistic 'content'"; (4) they have repudiated Western traditions of inquiry in preference for the minor and undistinguished contributions of "those who have hitherto remained on the margins of history: the powerless, the illiterate, the dispossessed"; (5) they have begun to seem increasingly pointless to students; and (6) they are badly taught.

For my purposes the last two of these charges are less important than the others. The authors of "Speaking for the Humanities" dispute the figures of critics who have traced a decline in humanities enrollments since 1970. There was, the authors point out, no desertion from the ranks of English majors at Rutgers and Wesleyan, and at Harvard the number of humanities majors "actually rose"—at five other universities,

1 "Speaking for the Humanities," by George Levine, *et al.*; ACLS Occasional Paper, 7; American Council of Learned Societies, 1989.

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too. I am no statistician, but still it might be asked if enrollments at these universities reflect what the authors imply they do—a continuous and growing interest in the newly re-invigorated humanities. Perhaps they only reflect the growing power of those who claim to have re-invigorated the humanities, including the directors of humanities centers. "For students," as Robert Nisbet says, "know with unerring instinct where the power lies." And as to whether the humanities are badly taught: the important question is what ideas are now being disseminated in their name. The quality of teaching can be no better than the doctrines that are taught.

Here, then, is how the authors defend the humanities. First, the humanities are specialized because all good research is. "[G]eneral significance," the authors say, "only develops from specialized and particularized research." The only alternative to specialization is "belle lettrists who unselfconsciously sustain traditional hierarchies"—an anachronistic breed among whose number, presumably, belongs a writer like Allen Tate. In "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer," though, Tate argued that these same "belle lettrists" (better known as critics), in their willingness to form literary judgments, were the ones who actually called into question the fixed hierarchy of Eng. Lit. One has only to think of F. R. Leavis's attack on Milton in *Revaluation* (1936), or Yvor Winters's on Frost in *The Function of Criticism* (1957), to realize that preferring "belles lettres" to specialized research does not lead to the endorsement of traditional hierarchies, unselfconsciously or otherwise. But the terms of the debate have become hopelessly politicized. Literary judgments, as the authors of "Speaking for the Humanities" point out, have become "social and cultural exclusions"; the case for or against a writer is now made on the basis not of his talent or intelligence, but of his "gender, race, and class." To attend to the changing conditions is what is meant by being professionalized. The professionally trained scholar no longer needs to think on his own. For "by developing sets of questions, imposing norms which have to be questioned and thereby promoting debate on key problems," write the authors of the pamphlet, "professionalization *makes thought possible*" (emphasis added).

And this suggests the defense of theory. The new "modes of analysis" that have gained authority in the humanities over the past two decades have created "new contexts" for study; they have "been the precondition of the re-emergence of the humanities." Deconstruction, feminism, philosophical hermeneutics, Foucauldian historicism, the neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School—they are said to have redefined the humanities, to have fundamentally altered our view of the great works of the Western tradition; they must not, the authors say, be "suppress[ed]" in teaching these things to today's students.

It will be recognized at once, however, that this defense of theory does very little more than reheat the case for professionalism. Rather than defend theory as having an intrinsic value, the argument simply states that theory is what makes the re-emergence of the humanities possible. What we are left with is the inference that to be theoretically sophisticated in today's humanities departments is the true meaning of professionalism. To be professional is to speak on what E. M. Forster called "the accredited themes." It is to ask the right questions, in the right idiom. It is, in short, to be acceptable.

These indeed are the terms in which the authors of "Speaking for the Humanities" attempt to justify the development in humanistic study that most alarms its critics—the turn to ideology. Whatever the objection to ideology, it is "the consensus of most of the dominant theories," the authors say, that all knowledge is ideological.

> The current debate about the humanities can itself be seen as emerging from an ideological context since one of the results of the contemporary interest in theory and the critique of the foundations of knowledge in

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> many disciplines has been the realization that all stances in scholarly research, as in the choice of values, imply a prior commitment to some basic belief system.

Anyone who thinks otherwise is "mistaken." The tone of positivism and established authority is chilling. By erecting a difficulty into an impossibility, and an impossibility into a virtue, the authors arrive at the position that the best scholarship is resigned to being ideological. Since objectivity is unattainable, scholarship might as well be written out of a "commitment to some basic belief system."

The practical effect of this doctrine can be demonstrated by a single example. In many humanities classrooms, Shakespeare is now taught as a central figure in the Renaissance primarily because of the degree to which he reflects the era's unacknowledged ideology of conquest and colonialism. The important thing for students to understand in reading *The Tempest*, for instance, is that the Renaissance desire to enslave "native populations," and even torture and kill them, is what accounts for Shakespeare's creation of the character of Caliban, who "once was mine own king" before the arrival of Prospero and his band of colonizing Westerners. The ideology of slavery, in fact, is said to have generated the character of Caliban. Of course, this is Shakespeare as interpreted by Frantz Fanon. Small wonder that *The Wretched of the Earth*—the popular Sixties handbook of revolution—has been added recently to the freshman curriculum at Stanford. It serves as the inspiration behind much "advanced" literary thinking at the present time.

But the real objection to interpreting Shakespeare as an apologist for colonialism goes much deeper. As Thomas Short has pointed out in *Academic Questions*,[2] the interdisciplinary approach rests upon nothing more solid than the classroom

2 See "'Diversity' and 'Breaking the Disciplines'" by Thomas Short in *Academic Questions*; Summer 1988, pages 6-29.

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authority of the teacher. Standing in back of the critique of Shakespeare's ideology are two activities performed separately and in advance: there is literary analysis, in which *The Tempest* is reduced to a selection of textual evidence; and there is historical investigation, in which documents are arranged to contrive a system of beliefs. But students are taught to perform neither of these activities. All they are given is a connection between the two. And not even that. For the "proof" of the argument derives from these separate disciplinary activities and not from the critique itself. Because students are taught neither to read attentively nor to reconstruct the thinking of the past, they do not learn to reason either critically or independently. What they learn is to take the teacher's word on trust.

The authors of "Speaking for the Humanities" want to have it both ways. On one hand they claim the university is the province of specially trained experts, while on the other they allege that the university's first concern is with values and ideologies and belief systems. But specialization and ideology are contradictory notions. Specialization is the basis of academic freedom: scholars are guaranteed the freedom to teach and write, without supervision or outside interference, because of special qualifications in their field. But ideology is an insistence upon a prerogative: university professors lay claim to the right to use their classrooms as forums for the expression of political opinion. On what authority, however, do they make this claim?

The new source of authority on campus is the view that the university must be a representative institution. As such, say the authors of "Speaking for the Humanities," the university must reflect "the experience and aspirations of other groups" than "Western white males." On this argument, minorities (including Western white females) must be offered an education which affirms their cultural identity, while everyone else is given "instruction in otherness." Hence the need for humanists, who have been trained for the task.

This is knowledge as social engineering. But even so, the program has not been entirely successful, because to date the argument has not been the self-consistent one that all "experiences and aspirations" are welcome in the new university. Rather, the argument has been the self-contradictory one that only some viewpoints are acceptable. Doubts about feminism, the logic of the assault on Western traditions, or the intellectual coherence of "non-majority studies"—these are not welcome. But upon no other basis than that of professional unacceptability and bad politics. It is for this reason that neoconservatives criticize leftist influence in the university, especially in the humanities.

The criticisms have been misrepresented. It is not that the Left is being objected to as such. Charles A. Beard, F. O. Matthiessen, and M. I. Finley (to name only the dead) have proved (as if any proof were needed) that the mere fact of being a man of the Left disqualifies no one as a scholar. The real objection is to a one-sided view of the university—namely, that it must be a forum for dissent from American power, "dissent" being defined exclusively in leftist terms. This adversarial creed is intellectually bankrupt, though still powerful. It should give way to the older conception of the university as a place for learning the specific activities that enable a person to think independently, rather than the political ideologies that permit him to think "correctly," if he thinks at all.

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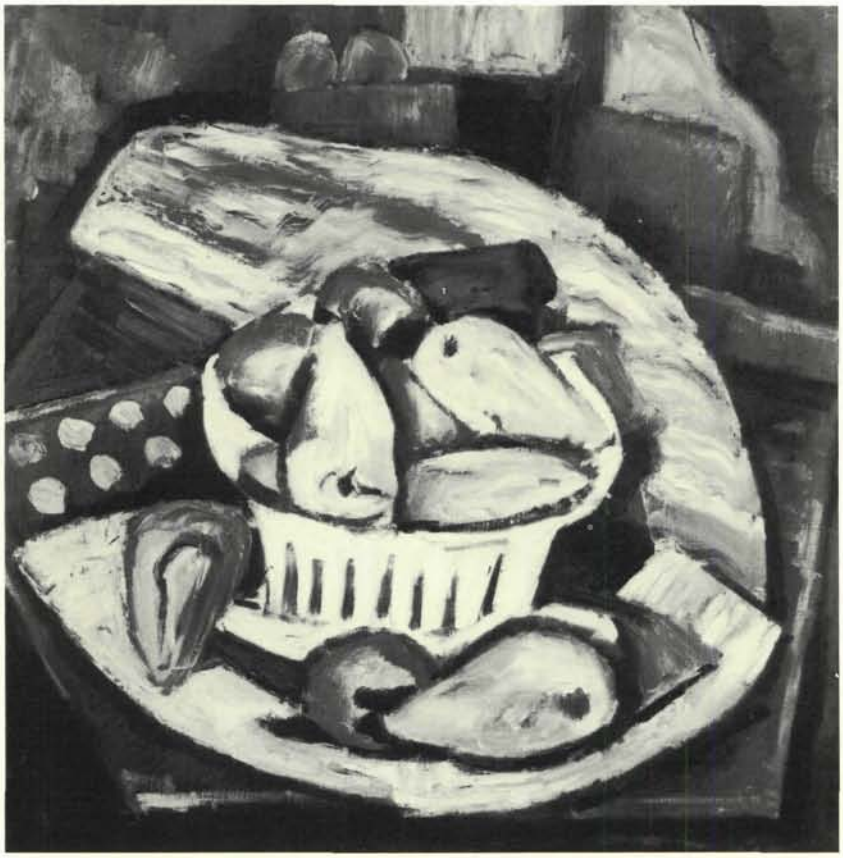

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